

# Preface

*The family is changing, not disappearing. We have to broaden our understanding of it, look for the new metaphors.*

—Mary Catherine Bateson

This anthology originated in the classroom. Over the years, students have challenged me to bring in readings on the family that integrate material on race-ethnicity, social class, gender, and sexuality. The lack of fully integrated family texts has been frustrating and puzzling to me; most anthologies on the family “lump” family diversity into one section, which often appears at the end of the book. This placement is problematic because it still marginalizes those families that differ from the idealized traditional family of the dominant culture. Instead, the analysis and discussion of diverse family forms should occur throughout the selected topics of a family course. To achieve an integrated framework, I often have compiled large packets of material to bring diverse family experiences and multicultural and intersectional perspectives into my classroom. After years of teaching family courses this way, I realized that a new anthology could and *should* be created to integrate the voices and experiences of diverse families. This book represents a collection of articles that meets four pedagogical goals: (1) to deconstruct the notion of a universal family over time and across cultures; (2) to reflect cutting-edge scholarship by well-known family scholars; (3) to integrate race-ethnicity, social class, gender, and sexuality in the analysis; and (4) to promote critical reading and thinking.

The title of this anthology, *Shifting the Center: Understanding Contemporary Families*, was inspired by Margaret Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins’s essay “Shifting the Center and Reconstructing Knowledge” in *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology* (1995). In their essay, Andersen and Collins argue for the need to shift the center of analysis away from the dominant culture to the experiences of all racial-ethnic and social class groups. In her book, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), bell hooks, too, argues that “much of feminist theory emerges from privileged women who live at the center, whose perspectives on reality rarely include knowledge and awareness of the lives of women and men who live in the margin” (p. x). Thus, hooks argues that in order for us to have an improved understanding of all human lives, we must place the experiences and knowledge of women of color at the center of feminist theorizing and activism. The same argument can be made for any area of scholarship, including the study of families.

In this anthology on families, “shifting the center” means that the research on families of color, LGBTQ families, working-class families, and other diverse family forms is moved from the margins of analysis to the center of the analytical framework. In many texts, these family forms are often treated as “alternative” or “deviant.” By shifting our focus of inquiry away from family structures based only on traditional marriage,

students can better understand that numerous family structures coexist. This anthology examines several family forms, including arranged marriages, cohabitation, heterosexual marriage, domestic partnerships, couples living apart, single-parent households, stepfamilies, multigenerational families, and LGBTQ families. “Shifting the center” encourages students to compare these diverse family forms to one another. This shift also enables the instructors to deconstruct the idealized, white, heterosexual, middle-class family and enables students to see how present conceptualizations of family have been socially constructed over time and across cultures.

To understand that the family is a social creation, students need to study the family both historically and comparatively. Historical and cross-cultural articles can help shatter the idea that one universal family form is constant across cultures and time. Thus, some of the articles I have selected show how current patterns of family formation and dissolution in the United States differ from those in our past and in other countries. The articles on various racial-ethnic families in the United States, including the selections on immigrant families, also demonstrate how families within a particular cultural group change over time. As family historian Stephanie Coontz argues in her book *The Way We Never Were* (1992), the study of family history enables students to dispel many myths about families in the United States. As students study family history, they more easily separate nostalgic misconceptions about the family from the realities of contemporary families.

In addition, the articles in this anthology use social science research to show how the institution of the family is related to other social institutions in society and how those institutions affect the intimate center of family lives. Thus, the readings encourage students to discern the relationships between families and society and among individuals within a family. For example, to help students see that family relations are inherently gendered, I have included selections that show how gender is constructed and maintained within the institution of the family, and how gender affects power dynamics, communication, and intimacy between family members. Moreover, by reading articles on families, work, and poverty, students gain a better understanding of how socioeconomic class positions can affect family structure and relations. Reading articles that illuminate either the macrolevel of family structure in society or the microlevel of social interaction within families helps students perceive the multiple linkages between society, families, and individuals. Furthermore, when articles address the intersection of race-ethnicity, gender, social class, and sexual orientation at these two levels of study, students get a fuller picture of contemporary family diversity, including an understanding of how diverse families affect individual identities.

The articles in this anthology should enhance students’ abilities to compare social science research findings with the assumptions underlying public debates about family. Students will be better able to utilize research evidence in evaluating images of family life offered in the popular culture, especially in film, on television, and in music lyrics. If students learn to evaluate empirical evidence, they also will be able to make better-informed decisions about public policy issues concerning families and perhaps, in the future, to shape better social policies for *all* families.

Ultimately, it is my hope this anthology will instill a sociological imagination in students. By encouraging students to think critically about what they are reading, this anthology helps students understand the difference between family concerns that are “public issues” and those that are “private troubles.” This anthology contains the most current, innovative work by family scholars that highlights the concepts, theories, and research methodologies currently used to study family. I have tried to choose articles that are accessible, timely, and substantive and which will engage students and promote critical thinking. Thus, my assumption throughout has been not only that students are capable of understanding rigorous social science research on families, but also that the research can inspire students to think more critically about families and our social world.

## Changes to the Fifth Edition

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With this fifth edition, I maintain my commitment to having the articles meet the four pedagogical goals described earlier: (1) to deconstruct the notion of a universal family over time and across cultures; (2) to reflect cutting-edge scholarship by well-known family scholars; (3) to integrate race-ethnicity, social class, gender, and sexuality in the analysis; and (4) to promote critical reading and thinking. Since I revised the fourth edition in 2010, there has been an explosion of scholarship in the sociology of the family. Therefore, I have extensively revised this edition to incorporate more of this cutting-edge scholarship. Specifically, I have added 24 new selections that either focus on timely social issues in contemporary family life (i.e., LGBTQ families, immigrant families and race, older couples who live apart, transgender people and marital status discrimination, the decline of marriage, the outsourcing of family work, intergenerational relationships, the effects of religion on remarriage, cohabitation and housework, the effects of divorce on children, single mothers and poverty) or enhance the racial-ethnic diversity of family scholarship already contained in earlier volumes. In particular, I have added seven new readings that examine LGBTQ families and three new readings on the racial-ethnic diversity of family for a total of 15 readings on racial-ethnic diversity. In particular, there are several new readings that focus on immigrant families' experiences in the United States.

Another new feature of the fifth edition is the revision of several sections to better accommodate the diverse literature on family life and new scholarship. These revised sections are (1) Divorce, Remarriage, and Blended Families; and (2) Families and Poverty. While there are new readings in every section, each section still contains important classics or works by key family scholars. These extensive updates should enable professors and students to examine aspects of family life in greater depth. Of course, for all of the readings, I have tried to choose selections that are interesting and accessible to students. To that end, I have edited some of the longer readings from the fourth edition to make them more accessible.

Probably the largest change from the fourth edition to the fifth edition is the deletion of a couple of readings due to the high costs of permissions. Please know that the costs of getting permissions to use scholarly works has greatly increased over the last two decades, and some works are too expensive to reproduce here. After much deliberation, I decided to cut a few of these pieces in order to make room for a couple of new readings that provide a critical new perspective on the family. Note that SAGE also has developed an accompanying test bank that contains many examination and discussion questions for each reading. SAGE is committed to developing these items with the goal of helping instructors test students' understanding of key sociological concepts and themes. Please note as well that I welcome feedback from professors and students on this edition of *Shifting the Center: Understanding Contemporary Families*.

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