

28

FAMILY SOCIOLOGY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

FELIX M. BERARDO

CONSTANCE L. SHEHAN

University of Florida, Gainesville

The beginning of a distinctive family sociology had its roots in centuries of accumulated writings on the subject. As Christensen (1964) noted in his attempt to frame that early history, "There has developed a vast literature on the family, running all the way from superstition-based folklore, to imaginative fiction, to poetic outpourings, to philosophical speculations, to popularized magazine articles and advice columns, and finally to reports of scientific investigations" (p. 3). It was generally recognized that family phenomena have widespread ramifications with respect to personal happiness and social stability. Indeed, the "wide range of commentary, analysis, and political action, over a period of twenty-five hundred years, suggests that throughout history we have been at least implicitly aware of the importance of family patterns as a central element in human societies" (Goode 2005:16).

We, of course, make no attempt here to cover this varied and expansive range of literature. Instead, we restrict our focus to North American family sociology, beginning with Christensen's overview of family studies, which he saw as historically sequencing through four partially overlapping stages: *preresearch* (prior to the middle of the nineteenth century), *social Darwinism* (last half of the nineteenth century), *emerging science* (first half of the twentieth century), and *systematic theory building* (1950 up to 1964, when his work was published as the first *Handbook of Marriage and the Family*).

Christensen gave little attention to the preresearch era, characterizing it as primarily emotional, speculative, infused with mythology, and highly superstitious in content. There was little in the way of generalizations

(which were often contradictory) that could be identified as resulting from the rigorous application of scientific methodologies. It should be noted, however, that many influential philosophers, political scientists, and historians, as well as the early feminists of this period, offered important writings on the family. Thus, to dismiss all writings about families that appeared before the mid-twentieth century as lacking in value is unwarranted.

The social Darwinian period saw the emergence of a body of empirical literature (mostly anthropological) that viewed the family through broad historical, institutional, and comparative perspectives. Starting with evidence regarding biological evolution, an analogy regarding social evolution emerged. Its proponents concentrated on establishing phases of evolutionary development of family forms. However,

the methods of data collection were poor, resting upon historical and anecdotal records of doubtful validity built up from reports of travelers and missionaries with minimal training in ethnography. Methods of analysis were descriptive and impressionistic, producing few firm propositions that could be left unchallenged. (Hill 1962:425)

During the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century, a focus on a variety of urban family problems and on a social reform agenda also developed. A number of prominent women sociologists worked at this time.

The Industrial Revolution had brought on or intensified such conditions as poverty, child labor, women's restlessness accompanying emancipation [sic], prostitution, illegitimacy,

290 • SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

and divorce. The relationship of these to the family was quickly seen, and the result was a small amount of research, but considerably more agitation, directed toward social reform. (Christensen 1964:8)

The social Darwinian evolutionary emphases of this period faded and were eventually replaced by an emerging science with a self-avowed value-free orientation and a more rigorous methodological stance. Social survey techniques, statistics, and systematic testing of hypotheses were now increasingly used in family research. Moreover, in Christensen's (1964) view,

the most pronounced characteristic of twentieth-century family study is its emphasis upon the internal relationship of family members . . . Interest in studying the family broadly, as a social institution, has materially shifted to an interest in studying it more narrowly and internally as an association. This is the social-psychological approach . . . It has been expressed through expanding research, teaching, and counseling on such social phenomena as dating, mate selection, marriage adjustment, parent-child relationships, and personality formation within the family context. (Pp. 8–9)

Others have characterized this as a shift from the macroscopic to microscopic approach to family studies. During this transition, there was a gradual decline in the resistance to research on sensitive family issues and a greater public acceptance of such inquiries.

Finally, a period of systematic theory building began and continued throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. There were now "serious attempts to pull together and assess the various researches of the past, and to first delineate and synthesize the several schools of thought or theoretical frames of reference which have been used in family study" (Christensen 1964:9–10). Interestingly, this period also saw a revival of cross-cultural and comparative family studies. However, unlike those of the past, these were "more scientific and more suitable to sound theory building than were their earlier counterparts" (p. 10).

Among Christensen's conclusions was an observation of a growing concern over theory building in family sociology and the delineation of several distinct theoretical approaches. At the time, five of these were deemed sufficiently promising to be included in the first version of the *Handbook of Marriage and the Family* (1964): the institutional, the structural functional, the interactional, the situational, and the developmental. In subsequent years, these and other alternative conceptual frameworks or orientations seen as useful for family research were elaborated (e.g., Nye and Berardo 1966).

FAMILY SOCIOLOGY AND FAMILY HISTORY

Scientific disciplines, of course, do not develop in isolation from other fields. Indeed, their expansion and sophistication

are often assisted by reciprocal contributions from other areas of inquiry. Such is the case with respect to various knowledge interchanges between family sociology and the multidisciplinary field of family history, whose scholars have challenged long-held generalizations about historical developments of family forms and practices (Coontz 2000). For example, the work of social historians has led to a questioning of earlier sociological paradigms that posited a uniform process of family formation. Their research revealed the fallacies underlying "unilineal" assertions regarding the impact of industrialization and modernization on family types and changing family relationships.

The most important contributions made by family historians to other social science disciplines deal with the themes of diversity, uneven change, and human agency (Baca Zinn and Eitzen 2002:34–38). Cross-disciplinary interchanges have stimulated a large and growing body of work on family diversity. "Historians have discovered so much diversity that any discussion of 'the Western family' must be qualified. Instead of a prevailing type of family at any one time, several types were present from the beginning" (Baca Zinn and Eitzen 2002:34). Especially noticeable has been a greater focus on racial and ethnic categories and their implications for familial roles and processes, especially those of women, which has shed light on adaptations necessitated by changing economic or political constraints and opportunities (Coontz 2000:285).

Social historians of the family have challenged the view that there is one family form or process that is superior to others. Instead, they have offered more inclusive definitions of families to encompass the various dimensions of family diversity, spurred by a growing recognition that "there are many different types of families, with many different needs, and many different ways of meeting those needs. Family diversity is a way of characterizing the variability within and among families" (Demo, Allen, and Fine 2000:1–2). This position has pretty much been incorporated into contemporary sociological perspectives, though it has not quelled the ongoing political debate over the priority of certain family structures and "family values" over others (Benokraitis 2000). Nevertheless, the current sociological position argues for recognition and acceptance of family diversity. In fact, family diversity has emerged as a prominent subspecialty within family sociology. Today it covers a wide range of topics, illustrated by the *Handbook of Family Diversity* (Demo et al. 2000), which focuses on structural and processual forms of diverse families, along with variations of family well-being, and gives particular attention to a wide spectrum of issues related to the social stratifications of race, social class, sexual orientation, and age. It also examines the application of diversity to such areas as clinical practice, family life education, and family policy. Scholarship in this area has prompted a reexamination of the definition and meaning of the term *family* itself to take into account an expanding range of family configurations. These efforts have also contributed to the ongoing paradigm shifts in family sociology.

PARADIGM SHIFTS IN FAMILY SOCIOLOGY

The history of all sciences reveals periodic paradigmatic shifts triggered by new theoretical and empirical developments in a particular discipline. Over the past several decades, family sociology has experienced such shifts in its major orientations. Prior to the 1950s, the field was characterized by a variety of theoretical frameworks, including the interactional, family-life-cycle, and family problems approaches, along with an early institutional-functional approach derived mostly from anthropology. However, by the mid-1950s, Parsonian functionalism had become the dominant perspective in family sociology:

For Parsons, the family's remaining functions involve primarily expressive roles, whereas outside of the home modern societies require that impersonal, instrumental roles prevail. He generalized these social roles linking female roles with expressive roles and male roles with instrumental roles, claiming that this division of labor is more stable, complementary, and efficient. Hence a heterosexual, nuclear family with clearly defined breadwinner-homemaker roles is the most functional family form in modern societies. (Mann et al. 1997:318)

In subsequent decades this viewpoint was increasingly challenged by

new scholarship depicting the diverse experiences of women and men from different classes, races, and ethnicities spawned in part by the Civil Rights Movement, the rise of the New Left, and the modern Women's movement. These new voices called into question many of the underlying assumptions of the structural functionalist viewpoint on families and highlighted the conflict, inequality, and diversity in family experiences. (Mann et al. 1997:371)

While the structural functional approach has by no means disappeared, the diversity of family studies that emerged from this new emphasis led to a rise in theoretical pluralism in family sociology and an interest in assessing its changing paradigmatic status.

Mann and colleagues (1997) attempted to assess paradigmatic transformations in family sociology from the 1960s through the 1990s by examining the major theoretical perspectives employed in multiedition textbooks designed for advanced-level courses: functionalism, exchange theory, symbolic interactionism, developmental theory, conflict theory, and feminist theory. They found evidence of a slow but definite integration of more critical theoretical frameworks into subsequent editions of family textbooks to counter the more traditional approaches to, for example, family-related social class issues. However, they also discovered that macrolevel functional theory and microlevel life-cycle theory had continued as the prevailing frameworks during this period, with two notable exceptions—the treatment of African American families and gender issues. Over time, these areas received wider

coverage by the textbook authors, who increasingly drew on a growing critical and more conflict-oriented literature. Regarding African American families, they noted that

in most cases, the integration of this new literature was associated with a shift toward more critical theoretical analyses by textbook authors. Indeed, the findings on this topic are especially notable, because this is the first time we have seen the clash between competing paradigms result in a transformation of the perspectives of many authors. (P. 334)

A similar development was noticeable with respect to gender issues. Textbooks began to incorporate theories of gender oppression, along with critical analyses of traditional gender roles. At the end of the 30-year period examined by Mann and colleagues (1997), other areas of study in family sociology, such as domestic violence, had begun to show small, incremental movements toward employing more critical theoretical approaches. In the most recent textbooks, for instance, life-course analysis has replaced life-cycle analysis because it is better suited to revealing the diversity of family experiences. Mann and her coauthors concluded that textbooks “included more critical literature that shifted their foci from convergence to diversity, from differentiation to stratification, and from consensus to conflict” (p. 340). These and other findings “suggest that the degree to which social movements become institutionalized may be a significant factor determining paradigm shifts in academic textbooks” (p. 340).

The paradigmatic shifts in family sociology, involving, among other things, modern ideas about diversity and social context, are increasingly noted in the most recent textbooks. Among these, *Diversity in Families* (Baca Zinn and Eitzen 2002:24) is illustrative. These authors adopted a structural diversity framework that has as its major premise that “families are divided along structural lines that shape and form their dynamics” (p. 24) and incorporates several thematic guidelines:

Family forms are socially constructed and historically changing; family diversity is produced by the very structures that organize society as a whole; the social locations in which families are embedded are not the product of a single power system but are shaped by intersecting hierarchies; family diversity is constructed through social structure and human agency; and understanding family diversity requires the use of wide-ranging intellectual traditions. (Pp. 24–25)

Each of these is spelled out in greater detail in their textbook with a focus on multiple family forms. In their view, the key to understanding family diversity is the structural distribution of social opportunities. For example,

the uneven distribution of work, wages, and other family requirements produce[s] multiple family realities. . . . At any particular time, a society will contain a range of family types that vary with social class, race, region, and other structural conditions. (Baca Zinn and Eitzen 2002:24)

These structural conditions result in differential opportunities for individuals within families as well as for families as social units.

FAMILY SOCIOLOGY AND FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP

A number of social movements and various demographic shifts have played a role in the development of family sociology since the middle of the twentieth century. Perhaps one of the clearest examples of how social movements can influence paradigmatic developments can be seen in the women's movement and the impact of its associated feminist literature on family sociology.

As we noted earlier, much of the sociological literature from the 1950s and early 1960s portrayed contemporary marriage as an arrangement of love between equals, using terms such as "companionate marriage," "egalitarian marriage," and "symmetrical family." Theories of the time argued that men's "instrumental" roles and women's "expressive" roles were functional in advanced industrial societies (Parsons and Bales 1955). Feminists have argued, however, that the "reduction of gender divisions to a language of roles obscures realities of power and conflict and provides, at best, a shallow understanding of complex dynamics of gender" (Lopata and Thorne 1978). Feminist scholars began to call attention to the conflicted and unequal aspects of family relationships, using the concept of patriarchy to highlight the family as the locus of domination by gender and age (Osmond and Thorne 1993).

One of the earliest and most influential feminist voices in family sociology was Jesse Bernard (1972), whose book *The Future of Marriage* questioned the viability of an institution that subordinated women. Another scholar whose work foreshadowed later feminist emphases in family studies was Safilios-Rothschild (1969). Her insights about the effects of interviewing only one person to provide information about a marriage or family called attention to what would later be referred to as "standpoint" in feminist work.

Feminist scholars also attempted to demystify the ideology of the monolithic family, arguing that it reinforced the economic exploitation of all women. In the 1980s, feminist research shifted from an emphasis on patterns of domination and constraint to women's resistance and negotiation of the structures that dominated them. Attention to the intersecting influences of gender, race, and class on individuals' lives within and outside families gained increasing momentum (Stacey 1990).

Thorne and Yalom (1992) identified five themes that are central to a feminist rethinking of the family. First, feminists have challenged the ideology of the monolithic family (i.e., the nuclear family with the breadwinner husband and full-time wife and mother as the only legitimate family form). Second, feminists have focused on underlying and encompassing structures of gender, generation, sexuality,

and race and class rather than on the family as the unit of analysis. Third, feminists have given voice to experiences within families that run counter to the idea of the family as a loving refuge, highlighting men's dominance and women's subordination within and outside of families, varying experiences of motherhood, and the presence of inequitably distributed work, conflict, and violence. Fourth, feminists have raised questions about family boundaries, challenging traditional dichotomies between private and public and between family and society. Finally, feminists seek a realistic and complex understanding of families as part of a larger program of social change. Other periodic assessments of the state of family sociology have documented the increasing influence of feminism (Ferree 1990; Fox and Murry 2000; Thompson and Walker 1995).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS AND FAMILY THEORY

For some time, family sociology was criticized for slow and uneven progress in formulating theory (Settles 2000). However, the large and rapidly growing body of research in this area eventually led several scholars to shift their attention to evaluation and classification systems and better codification and synthesis of results. Consequently, the 1950s and subsequent decades increasingly saw formal delineations of several distinct conceptual frameworks or theoretical approaches, which, it was hoped, would enhance generalizations and theory building. Conceptual frameworks have been defined in various ways. For some scholars, they merely represent a group of concepts employed principally as a taxonomy. These involve the specification of

a small number of definitions which delineate the few aspects of reality with which sociology deals. These definitions, broadly speaking, tell the sociologist what is important for him [sic] to pay attention to when he views a human relationship, a group, or society. (Zetterberg 1963:7–10)

Others have employed broader definitions of such frameworks (Klein and Jurich 1993).

Among the early attempts to specify the role of conceptual frameworks was that offered by Hill and Hansen (1960), who saw their identification as crucial to the inventory and codification of family research and to the development and accumulation of propositions in family sociology. They were successful in identifying several frameworks. Five of these—the institutional, structural-functional, interactional, situational, and developmental approaches—were deemed sufficiently developed by Christensen to be included in the initial *Handbook of Marriage and the Family* (1964). At about the same time, Nye and Berardo (1966) published *Emerging Conceptual Frameworks in Family Analysis*. Reflecting the multidisciplinary aspect of family studies, its contributors were able

to specify 11 approaches. In addition to covering the 5 just noted, they detailed the anthropological, psychoanalytical, social psychological, economic, legal, and Western Christian. In the ensuing years, other scholars adapted or refined some of these and other emerging frameworks (Nye and Berardo 1966; Sprey 1990; White and Klein 2002; Winton 1995).

The next edition of the *Handbook of Marriage and the Family* (Sussman and Steinmetz 1987) took notice of the growing emphasis on systematic theory building and cited a dozen conceptual frameworks: symbolic interaction, situational, structural-functional, institutional, household economic, learning-maturational, developmental, psychoanalytical, systems, exchange, conflict, and phenomenological (Thomas and Wilcox 1987:87). The evolution and current status of these often competing approaches were given some attention in this work. It was noted that the earlier analytical confusion arising out of the multidisciplinary study of the family represented by these frameworks (due to differences in underlying assumptions, concepts, value orientations, and focus) had begun to diminish. Several approaches (e.g., those most closely tied to household economics and psychology) were dropped, while those with the greatest relevance to sociology remained, resulting in less competitiveness among the disciplines represented.

Thomas and Wilcox (1987) also noticed a more careful attempt among family scholars to define family theory and an emerging consensus as to the central place of propositions in its development (p. 87). The distinction between conceptual frameworks and family theory, as well as the relationship between the two, has been and continues to be somewhat ambiguous. The ongoing debate as to whether family sociology should stress conceptual frameworks or propositional theories has not been resolved. Some scholars take the position that conceptual frameworks are theory, while others vehemently deny such a claim, seeing them merely as summarizing devices. Still others view conceptual frameworks as a necessary step in theory formulation (Klein and Jurich 1993:37–39).

Apart from this as yet unresolved ambiguity, however, formal theory construction in the family field has been an ongoing activity since at least the 1970s, when a two-volume treatise titled *Contemporary Theories about the Family* (Burr 1979) was published. The process of theory building in family sociology has often involved the application of “mainstream sociological theoretical thinking to family theory,” which “has generated some notable accomplishments” (Thomas and Wilcox 1987:93). Thomas and Wilcox (1987) concluded their review of the history of family theory building on an optimistic note:

Building increment on increment of one research project after another in any area of the family field . . . [is] necessary foundation work that will eventually succeed in creating theory capable of explaining the phenomena under investigation. Better theory will increase the power of explanation,

predictions, and control. These will all result in a payoff in the practical realm of helping families solve problems. (P. 93)

The more recent progress in theory construction, as well as in methods, in family sociology has been tracked and evaluated through extensive scholarly overviews, including two editions of the *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methods*. The first of these appeared in 1993, and it was reissued a decade later. Among the shifts noted in the first *Sourcebook* was a movement away from family theories guided by a positivistic philosophy of science context, which basically saw theory driven by the accumulation of empirical observations, to one of postpositivism, which saw theory as *preceding* such observation and which takes the position that there are no facts without theories and that all theories are socially constructed (Boss et al. 1993:5).

Other emerging developments in the field, which cannot be detailed here, include the four-volume *International Encyclopedia of Marriage and Family* (Ponzetti 2003). Specific chapters on extant theories dealing with the family appear under a range of content headings, which include the following: dialectical, developmental, human ecology, life course, phenomenology, relationship, role, social exchange, structural-functional, and symbolic interaction. The growth of alternative perspectives or models in recent decades has necessitated in part some “metatheoretical stocktaking” to avoid polarization among adherents of competing frameworks and also to bring a degree of clarification to the field.

SUBSTANTIVE TRENDS IN FAMILY STUDIES

Along with the trend toward greater theory construction, there has been a parallel process of stocktaking, reflected, for example, in the several decade reviews that have appeared over the last 40 years and that have tracked changing trends in substantive topics in family research. Although there have been earlier periodic evaluations of family research trends, the series of decade reviews published in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* are perhaps most indicative of the directions of contemporary scholarship in this field.

To determine trends in the topics or issues that have received attention from family scholars over the past 50 years, we examined the four decade reviews published in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000) and special issues released by the *Journal of Family Issues* since its inception in 1980. Content analysis revealed that the predominant topics appear to have followed changes in family patterns and social movements (see Berardo and Shehan 1984). In the 1970s, for instance, research on adolescent childbearing, domestic violence, and divorce and remarriage proliferated. None of these topics had been the focus of a decade review article in

294 • SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

1970 but were treated as primary in the 1980 review. The epidemic of teen pregnancy was highlighted in research conducted throughout the 1970s. The 1980 decade review continued to reflect this emphasis with articles on premarital sexuality and adolescent childbearing. This focus is also seen in the 1990 review but was discontinued in the following decade, paralleling the decline in teen pregnancies.

Research on “sex roles” noticeably increased in the 1970s, coinciding with the emergence of the second wave of feminism, and was a topic in the 1980 decade review. This emphasis was continued in the next decade, reflecting the growing interest in gender. However, the language used to refer to this area changed from “sex roles” to “gender,” denoting the shift away from the characteristics of individuals to the structural dimension of social life. Not all research examining gender in families took a feminist perspective. The emergence of a strong feminist cadre of researchers during the late 1970s and 1980s was reflected in the 1990 review, which examined feminist perspectives in family research. As a result, attention on gender issues and feminist approaches to research was integrated throughout many of the subsequent articles on other substantive topics (e.g., violence).

Over the 1980s, research on the causes and consequences of divorce intensified, reflecting the dramatic rise in rates of marital dissolution, which began in the mid-1960s. In the 1970 decade review, there was no special attention given to this topic, but the following decades saw substantial space devoted to issues of divorce, desertion, and remarriage, including the impact on children. The latter emphasis most likely reflected the initiation of longitudinal studies of children of divorce. As the rates began to stabilize, the coverage of divorce and remarriage declined somewhat.

A similar pattern involving research pertaining to the intersection of employment and families can be identified. It wasn't until the 1990 decade review that articles on parental employment appeared. Not coincidentally, this followed a dramatic increase in the employment of mothers of young children. In the 2000 decade review, this focus expanded to include a renewed interest in the division of household labor. The broader economic circumstances of families and households began to receive extensive attention in the 1980s, and this trend has continued to the present. As noted earlier, the growth in research on family diversity is also observable.

Special issues published in the *Journal of Family Issues* since 1980 reveal similar trends. During the 1980s, a number of these focused on parenting, including the transition to parenthood, the impact of parenthood on psychological well-being, and childlessness. Other frequent topics included divorce, remarriage, and widowhood. Throughout the 1990s, parent-child relationships continued to receive concentrated attention. As reflected in our analysis of the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* decade reviews, employment, economic issues, and household

labor also emerged as central concerns in papers published in the *Journal of Family Issues* during the same time period. Most recently, greater attention has been given to aging families and elder care, no doubt reflecting our aging population.

IDEOLOGICAL INFLUENCES ON FAMILY SOCIOLOGY

Over the course of its evolution, family sociology has felt the influence of various and often opposing ideologies reflected in the works and activities of its researchers, theorists, and practitioners. This perhaps became most apparent in the long-standing debate over the connection between social change and the alleged decline of the family. Vincent (1966) long ago noted that “since the earliest writing available, changes occurring in the institution of the family have been used and interpreted to support either an optimistic or a pessimistic premise concerning social change, and the pessimists have consistently outnumbered the optimists” (p. 31). Popenoe (1993), for example, describes several such changes that, in his view, signal family disorganization and decay. These changes include the decrease in traditional nuclear households, a historical decline in fertility, a continuously high divorce rate, changing family structures through divorce and remarriage, the rise in dual-worker families, expanding equalitarianism, and the spread of cohabitation among the unmarried.

Others have challenged such assertions, emphasizing instead the family's remarkable resiliency and ability to adapt to environmental flux by reorganizing its structures and relationships.

The fact is that the family, like other institutions, is in a perpetual state of evolution rather than dissolution. It interfaces with those institutions in a panorama of complex transactions . . . Its ability to mediate, translate, and incorporate social change in the process of socializing its members is one of its major strengths. (Berardo 1987:427)

Similar observations about the adaptability of the family have been made by others (Berardo and Shehan 2004). The controversy and associated rhetoric over the presumed decline of the family are important insofar as which group—the pessimists or the optimists—gains influence in defining what is and what is not a family problem and the impact such views have politically on the development of family policy.

The ideological positions regarding this and other family matters sometimes get articulated in the major textbooks in the discipline. For example, one analysis of family textbooks that was published between 1994 and 1996 argued that most were poor to mediocre in terms of a balanced treatment of controversial issues, coverage of crucial topics, and scholarship or interpretation of

evidence. “Misrepresentations of the literature, misstatements of facts, faulty reasoning, and misinterpretations of evidence abound in books” (Glenn 1997:204). Glenn, a well-known family sociologist, was highly critical of what he perceived to be strong liberal or radical ideological biases in these books, especially with regard to the institutional aspects of marriage. In Glenn’s view, textbooks typically presented only negative images of marriage, with comparatively little attention given to its beneficial consequences. They also offered an overly adult-centered orientation, with a de-emphasis on child-related topics (for example, juvenile delinquency and violence, child abuse and neglect, and the effects of parental separation or divorce) and a failure to sufficiently stress the impact of family life on children.

Other equally respected scholars have strongly rejected these conclusions and charge, in part, that Glenn and his colleagues at the Council on Families are actively promoting a politically conservative agenda. We simply note here that these opposing viewpoints, and their associated charges and countercharges, continue to be expressed (Coleman and Ganong 2003). The so-called “family wars,” sometimes involving ad hominem attacks, remain part of the twenty-first-century sociological landscape.

CONTINUING CONTROVERSIES

The authors of the latest *Sourcebook of Family Theory and Research* (Bengtson et al. 2005) note several controversies in the field that have generated “firestorms of debate” among family scholars and that must be dealt with in the future. They

reflect differences in definitions, assumptions, and labels in studying families (and) conflict concerning the moral ends toward which theory should be directed. . . . Each issue reflects divisions of opinion concerning theory and epistemology—how we define families, the questions we ask, the knowledge we have about families, and the methods we use to gain such knowledge . . . Epistemological issues frame the ways we approach and define families. Definitions, assumptions, labels, and moral stances have powerful implications. They can be picked up by the mass media and misconstrued. (P. 614)

Among these issues, several were identified as having the potential to polarize family sociology: (1) the divergent epistemological perspectives of *positivism*, *post-modernism*, and *modernism*; (2) issues concerning gender *heteronormativity* and so-called queer theory; (3) the application of existing sociological theories to families, precluding the need for development of specialized family theories; (4) challenges to historical or traditional conceptualizations of the family; and (5) controversy over the *individualization* of family research and the resulting need for scholars to examine structural

factors and influence from multiple levels in studying families.

FAMILY SOCIOLOGY: THE FUTURE

We now shift our sights forward and speculate about the directions in which family sociology seems to be heading with respect to its research and theoretical agendas. Prognostications about the future, like most if not all scientific forecasting, must of necessity be framed in terms of degrees of probability, especially with respect to the fluid events covered by the social sciences.

The questions addressed by family scholars are influenced by a number of factors, such as serendipity, personal interest, the number and diversity of family professionals, social movements, the impact of key scholars and their germinal works, interactions between researchers and practitioners, the willingness of the public to participate in research, and values (Berardo and Shehan 1984). Moreover, the influence of the broader sociohistorical context on family scholarship also plays a role.

Hence, long-range forecasting about the future development of the family as well as family sociology must be approached cautiously and stated with somewhat less certainty than might be desired. Nevertheless, if present trends continue, especially if they are evident on a worldwide basis, then certain predictions are feasible. It is within the context of these short-range trends that forecasts are most likely to attain a reasonable degree of accuracy rather than being uninformed conjecture (Nye and Berardo 1973:423–24).

Analysis of Global Trends

There are several trends apparent around the globe that have and will continue to capture the attention of family scholars. Among these are

the spread of contraceptive knowledge and accessibility, rising rates of cohabitation, the movement toward more open mate-selection systems, a delayed age at first marriage, reductions in family size, the continued flow of women into the paid labor force and their expanded role as economic providers for their families, the increasing number of dual-earner families, rising divorce rates, and a growing surplus of elderly women as a result of extended life expectancy. (Berardo and Shehan 2004:257)

One research focus that will continue throughout the coming decades will be the changing roles of women, which are redefining family relationships. While this and other trends, such as the aging of populations, are occurring at very different points in time across societies, and at different accelerations, their evolution helps frame the research agenda of twenty-first-century family sociology worldwide.

296 • SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

In this context, Giddens (2005) notes a “global revolution” in progress with respect to changes affecting our personal and emotional spheres in terms of “how we think of ourselves and how we form ties and connection with others. It is a revolution advancing unevenly in different regions and cultures, with many resistances” (p. 26). It is manifested in intense discussions of issues surrounding sexual equality, the regulation of sexuality, and the future of the family, often reflecting the struggle between tradition and modernity (p. 27). As a result of numerous social changes, most family life, he contends,

has been transformed by the rise of the couple and coupledom . . . In the traditional family, the married couple was only one part, and often not the main part, of the family system. Ties with children and other relatives tended to be equally or even more important in the day to day conduct of social life. The couple came to be at the centre of family life as the economic role of the family dwindled and love, or love plus sexual attraction, became the basis for forming marriage ties. A couple once constituted has its own exclusive history, its own biography. It is a unit based upon emotional communication or intimacy . . . “Coupling” and “uncoupling” provide a more accurate description of the arena of personal life now than do marriage and the family . . . Marriage is no longer the chief defining basis of coupledom. (P. 29)

Shifts in attitudes toward marriage, divorce, sexual orientation and behavior, reproduction, and out-of-wedlock births have all been part of this process. What is emerging is what Giddens (2005) labels a “democracy of emotions” as the principal context of all relationships, including marriage. Such relationships are based on equalitarianism, respect, and communication, as well as the “processes of active trust—opening oneself up to the other. Self-disclosure is the basic condition of intimacy” (p. 30). Finally, he sees emotional communication and intimacy replacing past ties in three areas that bind together our personal lives—in sexual and love relations, parent-child relations, and friendship.

If Giddens is correct regarding such a worldwide trend, then what it portends for the future dynamics of marriage and family relationships will of necessity become an area to be analyzed by theorists and researchers in the discipline. This does not mean, of course, that the family will cease to exist. Indeed, “in most of the world, the traditional family may be shaken, but the institution will probably enjoy a longer life than any nation now in existence” (Goode 2005:14). Sociological study of families and intimate relationships will continue to be a prominent feature of the intellectual landscape for decades to come.