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CHAPTER TWO: WAYS OF STUDYING AND EXPLAINING MARRIAGES AND FAMILIES

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading Chapter 2, students should be able to:

1. Describe the connection between our observations of human behavior and the explanations we develop to interpret those observations.
2. Describe the various research methods that sociologists typically use in studying marriages and families.
3. Describe the major themes, ideas, and limitations of both traditional and contemporary research on marriages and families.
4. Describe the different perspectives and levels of analysis of each major sociological theory when applied to the study of marriages and families.
5. Describe the basic tenets of the academic discipline of men's studies and its value in adding to sociological knowledge about men and masculinities.

OUTLINE

I. **THE LINK BETWEEN RESEARCH AND THEORY**

A theory is an explanation of some phenomenon, relating ideas and observations to each other, as well as helping to explain them. Theories are important sources of ideas for researchers to test. Scientific research provides us with empirical evidence (data or evidence that can be confirmed by the use of one or more of the human senses) as a basis for knowledge or theories. Hypotheses are statements of relationships between two or more factors. The scientific method is a set of procedures intended to ensure accuracy and honesty throughout the research process. Steps involved in the scientific method are: select or formulate research questions and operationalize (state in concrete terms) concepts, select an appropriate research design, collect data, analyze the data, and then draw conclusions and report the findings.

II. **METHODOLOGICAL TECHNIQUES IN THE STUDY OF MARRIAGES AND FAMILIES**

Scientific research enables us to see what is, as opposed to what might be or what we hoped would be. A primary goal of research is to provide specific answers to questions of why or how by gathering empirical evidence. A potential problem for all scientific research is objectivity. Researchers bring theoretical biases into the research process. Reliability is the degree to which the research yields the same results when repeated by the same or other researchers. Validity is the degree to which the study measures exactly what it claims to be measuring. Quantitative analysis is a process in which data can be analyzed using numerical categories and statistical techniques; qualitative analysis focuses on specific or distinct qualities within the data that show patterns of similarity or difference among the research subjects.

A. **Surveys**

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Are one of the quickest ways to find out what we want to know about people, and are the most widely used method of studying marriages and families. Surveys are relatively cheap, but sometimes distorted. Interviews usually involve one person asking another person questions and recording the answers. Questionnaires typically are a set of printed questions that people read on their own and then record their answers.

B. **Observation**

Useful when researchers have only a vague idea of the behavior they want to study, when subjects are not readily accessible, or when there is no other way to get the information. These studies usually take a long time, can be expensive, generally involve few subjects, and offer little control over situations. However, they lead to in-depth understanding. With participant observation, the researcher becomes a part of the interaction being studied. The Hawthorne Effect is when people know they are being studied and often modify their behavior.

C. **Ethnography**

In general, the ethnography is a research technique for describing a social group from the group's point of view. An advantage of ethnographic studies is that they provide firsthand accounts of those whose lives we are studying.

D. **Scientific Methodologies Used by Feminist Researchers**

Over the past few decades feminist scholars have become increasingly concerned with who researchers study and how they study them, how conclusions are drawn, and what evidence those conclusions are based on. No method of research is of itself a feminist method, rather it is how the available methodologies are used. However, feminist researchers generally avoid the use of quantitative methods, relying heavily on qualitative methods. A basic goal is to present information previously ignored or suppressed. Gender is at the forefront of analysis, with special attention paid to how race, class, and gender interact.

III. A CRITICAL LOOK AT TRADITIONAL RESEARCH ON MARRIAGES AND FAMILIES

Historically, sociology as a discipline has claimed as one of its major goals the improvement of social life. Some critics, such as feminist scholars, have argued that in practice, sociology has not lived up to this goal. White middle-class marriages and families have been used as the norm against which other families are measured. Thus, much of what we know is based on a model of the family that represents only a small portion of today's marriages and families.

A. **A More Inclusive Sociology**

Conventional topics studied by sociologists lead us to ignore issues that would illuminate women's lives. When women have been studied in traditional marriage and family research, it has usually been in terms of a one-dimensional stereotypical model of woman as nurturant caregiver and caretaker confined to the home. Little relevant research has been done on African American women, except for the myth of the "black matriarchy." Few studies have been done on middle-class or upper-class families of color. In fact, across race and gender little research is carried out on upper-class families because those families have the power to

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limit access. Because women, people of color, and the lower classes lack power they are either largely ignored by or easily accessible to researchers. Gay and lesbian family lifestyles have been ignored by researchers, and what research exists is narrowly focused on or concerned with their sexual behavior.

B. **Contemporary Marriage and Family Scholarship**

A growing number of sociologists and interdisciplinary scholars are using many of the perspectives offered by the discipline, including the feminist perspective, to develop and transmit more and complete and accurate understanding of marriages, families, and intimate relationships. Social research must be evaluated by who is or is not the researcher, who does and does not get studied, which theoretical paradigms and underlying assumptions are accepted, which methods are used and how, and what the research actually says and does not say about the subjects.

IV. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

There is no single theory of marriages and families. Many perspectives (a broad explanation of social reality from a particular point of view) exist. These perspectives provide us with a basic image of society and human behavior.

A. **Structural Functionalism**

Views society as an organized and stable system, analogous to the human system, made up of a variety of interrelated parts or structures. Each structure/subsystem (the family, economy, government, education, religion) performs one or several functions or meets vital social needs. The terms system and structure refer to the interrelatedness or interaction of the parts, while function refers to the consequence or impact of something for itself and other parts of the system as well as the system as a whole.

i. The Family from a Functionalist Perspective: Families are regarded as systems that provide functions for the society and individual members. These functions historically have been divided along gender and age lines. Functionalists are interested in both manifest (overt) and latent (hidden) functions. They recognize that families may also be dysfunctional.

ii. The Nuclear Family Model: Talcott Parsons argued that in modern society the functional importance of the nuclear family has declined as many of its functions have been taken over and performed by other social institutions. According to Parsons, the two major functions of the modern family are now socialization of the young and personality socialization of adults.

iii. Critique: It implies functional imperatives for institutions and commodities and implies lack of clarity regarding functions, and it has a conservative bias.

B. **Conflict Theory**

Since the 1960s, the conflict perspective has become increasingly popular in modern sociology and in the works of feminist scholars.

i. Karl Marx: An economist, political agitator, and social theorist who revolutionized social and philosophical thinking about human society. Marx was appalled by the treatment of workers (the proletariat) and believed that the problem lay in the social organization of industrial

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(capitalistic) societies that put profits before people. Every aspect of social life is based on economic relationships, and conflict between competing groups is inevitable.

ii. Themes of Conflict Theory: What sets this theory apart from functionalism is the notion that conflict is natural and inevitable in all human interaction, including family systems. Of major concern are the inequalities that are built into social structures or systems (certain groups have more power and access to key resources).

iii. The Family from a Conflict Perspective: Some family members (especially males) benefit more than others.

iv. Critique: The underlying assumptions are too narrow and limited. It is not value-free. It is often criticized for explicitly advocating social change, thereby giving up some of its claim to scientific objectivity.

C. **Symbolic Interactionism**

Focuses on micro (small-scale) patterns of face-to-face interaction among people in specific settings. Based on the notion that society is made up of individuals who interact and communicate through the use of symbols (objects, words, sounds, and events that are given meaning by members of a culture), and who construct reality as they go about their daily lives (social construction of reality).

i. The Family from a Symbolic-Interactionist Perspective: The family represents a unified set of interacting individuals. The reality of marriage and family life is not fixed but is socially constructed by various family members with different roles, privileges, and responsibilities.

D. **Social Constructionism**

Social constructionism is an extension of symbolic interaction theory, in which the analysis is framed entirely in terms of a conceptualization of the social construction of reality. A guiding principle is that human experience is not uniform and cannot be generalized to all people.

i. Social Constructionism and the Family: Almost any subject related to marriage and family life can be analyzed within the context of the social-constructionist paradigm. For example, gender is a socially constructed system for classifying people as girl or boy, woman or man, feminine or masculine.

ii. Critique: Critics of social constructionism claim that it is inherently inconsistent and theoretically contradictory. Others argue that there is not a clear agreement about what constitutes constructionism.

E. **Social-Exchange Theory**

Adopts the economic model of human behavior based on costs, benefits, and the expectation of reciprocity (also known as the rational choice perspective).

i. The Family from a Social-Exchange Perspective: Family life is characterized by an exchange of goods and services. Costs and benefits are counterbalanced.

ii. Critique: Assumes that humans are rational, calculating beings who consciously weigh the costs versus the benefits of their relationships.

F. **The Developmental Family Life Cycle Model**

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This theory pays close attention to changes in families over time and attempts to explain family life in terms of a process that unfolds over the life course of families. One of the most widely used developmental theories in family sociology is an eight-stage model developed by Evelyn Duvall that covers the family from beginning families to aging families.

i. Critique: Although developmental family life cycle theory generally calls attention to the changing nature of families over time, it is difficult to distinguish a "typical" family.

G. **Feminist Theories and Perspectives**

Not a single unified view, but a common thread does run through a variety of feminist perspectives. It is woman-centered in three ways: 1) the starting points of all investigations are the situations and experiences of women; 2) it treats women as the main subjects and attempts to view the world from their vantage point; and 3) it is critical and activist on behalf of women. Several prominent feminist theories include: liberal, socialist, Marxist, radical, lesbian, women-of-color, and black feminist thought.

i. The Family from a Feminist Perspective: It asks both macro- and micro-level questions. For example, how does society (macro) maintain gender inequality in marriages, and what social and interpersonal (micro) processes occur in families to generate gender inequality.

ii. Critique: It is biased and excludes male experiences and perspectives. The goal of equal opportunity for women and men does not address such structural issues as class and race inequality. It is biased toward the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual women.

V. MEN'S STUDIES AND MARRIAGE AND FAMILY RESEARCH

In general, the men's studies perspective encompasses a critical examination of the functional and dysfunctional aspects of the traditional male gender role for men, women, children, and society at large. Men, like women, are oppressed by a social conditioning that makes them incapable of developing and expressing a wide range of personality traits or skills and limits their experiences.

A. **Men in Families**

A new politics of masculinity has emerged that claims that men's oppression is often overlooked in theoretical analyses of marriages and families. Researchers in men's studies contend that the male as head of his family has all but disappeared as more and more women either head their families or contribute equally to family income. Men are no longer full partners and participants in the family. On some levels a "new father" has emerged, with more involvement in childbirth and child-rearing practices.

i. Critique: A major criticism of the new politics of masculinity concerns its view of men as primary victims.

VI. SUPPORTING MARRIAGES AND FAMILIES

Contemporary families are under considerable stress and strain due to a number of social and political factors. One example is the Hurricane Katrina disaster. Research conducted

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on the impact of events like Katrina on American families is important because it can be used to make concrete proposals for the solution to family problems.

KEY TERMS

theory
scientific research
empirical evidence
hypotheses
variables
scientific method
qualitative analysis
quantitative analysis
survey
interview
questionnaire
Hawthorne effect
ethnography
ideologies
perspective
structural functionalism
manifest functions
latent functions
functional
dysfunctional
instrumental traits
expressive traits
conflict theory
symbolic interactionism
symbols
social construction of reality
social constructionism
social-exchange theory
developmental family life cycle theory

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/ CLASS EXERCISES

1. Divide your class into six groups; have each group take one of the theoretical perspectives discussed in the text (structural functionalism, conflict, symbolic interactionism, social constructionism, social exchange, developmental, and feminist) and make a brief, joint presentation to the entire class about that particular approach. When each group makes its presentation, the balance of the class may be instructed to take notes; when all four groups have completed their presentations, you can orchestrate a combined discussion concerning the importance of theory and why different perspectives are needed in studying marriage and family.
2. Encourage your students to confront how objectivity, replication, and precision of measurement are essential ingredients in studying the family. Emphasize the distinction that must be made between personal experience and family analysis. Give some examples and have your students think about this distinction. Propose a statement like, “Only-children are spoiled because they don’t have to share with their siblings.” Ask for a show of hands as to how many members of the class agree with this conclusion. Then point out that the statement lies in the realm of personal experience. Research, on the other hand, does not necessarily support this assumption; rather, some only-children are spoiled, but then, some firstborn children with several brothers and sisters are also spoiled. Furthermore, you may wish to elaborate on current research suggesting that there are many benefits for only-children.
3. Research on marriages and families can be more intrusive than any other type of research. For this reason, researchers must always be cognizant of the principle, “Do no harm.”

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Discuss the ethics of research. Hand out copies of the A.S.A. Code of Ethics and ask the members of your class to evaluate the implications of these principles for research on marriage and family issues.

4. Divide the class into groups and assign each group a methodology (experiment, survey, questionnaire, interview, observation, participant observation, case study, ethnography, feminist). Each group should develop an example of an appropriate research topic for their methodology. One person from each group should then present their ideas for research to the rest of the class, who should attempt to critique them.
5. Bring to class examples of research that has been completed—half of which should be good (appropriate methodology, operationally defined variables, validity, well-analyzed findings) and the other half of which should be examples of bad or weak research. See if the class is able to distinguish between the two.
6. Either assign a research question, or have students decide on their own question, and then have them conduct a simple survey. Before they make up their questionnaires, discuss with them the danger of biased questions. Have them conduct the surveys. Working in pairs or groups will give access to more subjects. Alternatively, hand out a questionnaire to everyone in the class. Divide the class into groups and ask each group to administer the questionnaire to a different segment of the society/campus (i.e., males, females, married, unmarried, different age or race, etc.). Compare findings during the next class period.
7. Have each student conduct an observational study on the campus and report their findings in class. (Examples of studies: seating patterns in the cafeteria, styles of eating, communication patterns, dorm behavior, interaction between males and females, behavior at sporting events or practices.)
8. Understanding research methods is not only useful for passing the professor's tests. The knowledge can also help students to make many decisions in everyday life. When they see an advertisement that claims that 98 percent of dentists surveyed (or dentists who responded) chose Brite White toothpaste they will know that it does not mean that 98 percent of all dentists recommend Brite White toothpaste. When politicians or the media use statistics to influence voters, it is useful to be able to distinguish fact from statistical fiction. Have the students do a content analysis of the television advertisements, news reports, or political speeches with a view toward determining the extent of deception being utilized.

FILMS AND VIDEOS

1. *Doing Sociological Research (Short Cuts)*, 2007, 40 min. (Halovine Online Classroom). Available online and for purchase this film series of short video programs are designed to give teachers the flexibility to integrate illustrative video material into their lessons in whatever way they choose. The shorts feature footage of research in action, up to date expert analysis and reinforcing graphics to bring four research methods to life.
2. *The Sociology of Families and Households*, 2005, 40 min. (Films for the Humanities and Sciences). This program examines the relationships between established sociological perspectives—structural functionalism, Marxist theory, and early feminist theory—and the family; investigates how over several decades the decline in marriage, an increase in cohabitation and divorce, and the lowering fertility rate in the U.K. have affected the

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British nuclear family; and juxtaposes the old sociology of families and the new, with its emphasis on comparative analysis and how family relationships are negotiated in everyday life.

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