The survey course in the family is one of the most popular sociology offerings. Unfortunately, the content of many of these courses and of most family sociology textbooks does not reflect the reality of the diverse family and household forms in American society, the societal forces that affect families and family members so strongly, the scholarship by social historians that demythologizes the families of the past, and the recent feminist scholarship that shows how life in families is experienced differentially according to gender. In short, many undergraduate students taking the family course are removed from the most scholarly developments in the field, the structural influences on families, the variation in families by class, race, and gender, and even the sociological perspective.

This paper examines the current state of family sociology and the problems in teaching this subject, and presents alternatives to the traditional presentations of the family.

THE FAMILY AS PRESENTED IN COURSES AND TEXTS

In a review essay, Miller and Klein (1981) note that the courses and texts for courses on the family differ on several dimensions. The texts and courses were found to be a) either theoretical or applied; b) either aimed at the marriage and family course or at the marriage course only; c) either sociological or psychological; d) either historical/cross-cultural or provincial contemporary American; and e) either research-based or anecdotal. On the basis of these differences, Miller and Klein identified four types of textbooks (1981, pp. 20–21):

1. Analytical-sociological texts. These books emphasize the family as a social institution, with attention to cultural variation and change. They tend to be theoretically eclectic and aimed at the advanced, upper-division courses.

2. Interdisciplinary, mixed analytical, and applied texts. These books are aimed at a middle ground. They try to be all things to all audiences, describing a wide range of topics with few unifying themes and little theory.

3. Traditional-functional texts. These books are aimed at the junior college and home economics markets. They tend to be ideologically conservative, atheoretical, and nonsociological.

4. Humanistic-psychological texts. These books emphasize individuals and their adjustments, with an appreciation for new family forms and lifestyles. They tend to be ideologically progressive, atheoretical, ahistorical, and nonsociological.

Since that review was written, a new category has emerged: texts that incorporate feminist contributions to family literature. In a recent review of current marriage and family textbooks, Pollis (1987) notes that the successful integration of the voluminous feminist scholarship on women into the family field poses serious challenges because of the sheer size and the diverse locations of the literature (p. 209). Yet many “feminist” concerns lie at the heart of family sociology, including sexuality, marriage, child rearing, interpersonal relationships, marital power, divorce, and life-cycle changes. Thorne’s (1982) essay “Rethinking the Family” discusses how feminist scholarship has begun to dispute standard concepts of the family and to break new intellectual ground. From this vantage point, virtually everything about the family takes on a different meaning because it is viewed as a system of power linked closely with sex and gender.

Important developments in the social sciences are enlarging the curriculum to include gender and race (Andersen 1987). “Curriculum integration” can have a profound effect on teaching; it compels us to examine family textbooks carefully. Because of these developments, the textbook is no longer “just a more or less adequate distiller of core knowledge and theories but a vehicle through which the theoretical, ideological and epistemological orientations as well as fundamental concepts of educational pedagogy are expressed (and legitimized) and through which
differing versions of reality regarding the family are transmitted" (Pollis 1987, p. 209).

FAMILY TEXTS AND THEIR SHORTCOMINGS

The types of texts described above reflect the different markets in which these books compete for adoption. Despite their differences, however, they share several shortcomings. First, each lacks for the most part a conceptual or theoretical orientation that unifies the text as a whole. In most texts, interesting topics are considered but students are often given little else than unrelated facts or titillating anecdotes. Without a structure of ideas or a framework for thinking about the family, students often complete the survey course unable to understand the importance of social factors in explaining the behavior of individuals and families. Moreover, they are unable to apply sociological explanations and insights to new issues and situations as they arise. Yet social life is coherent, and a course dealing with any social organization, including the family, must have a consistent framework within which to view, understand, and interpret social life.

A second shortcoming is the monolithic presentation of family life. The "typical" image, as transmitted through children's books, schools, radio, television, movies, newspapers, and politicians' speeches, is that of a white, middle-class, monogamous father-at-work/mother-and-children-at-home family living in a suburban one-family house. Unfortunately, this image is also embedded in college textbooks and courses aimed at understanding the family. Many contemporary texts transcend false universalism—the incorrect generalization that all people experience the family in the same way—but they, too, are often guilty of family descriptions and explanations filtered through white, middle-class perspectives and interests. Greenwood and Cassidy (1986), in their review of 13 textbooks on marriage and family, note that few of the texts included much material on racial/ethnic or social class variations. They found that diversity in families by race or class was omitted, noted only through photographs, or most rarely, described in a separate chapter (p. 297). Even when the presentation is neither white nor middle class, poor families or black families typically are discussed in separate chapters and tend to be treated as deviations from standard family forms. The inclusion of family patterns outside the middle class may be preferable to omission, but standard explanations that rest on the values and the distinctive socialization of those outside the middle class only serve to perpetuate erroneous images of the family.

Feminist approaches to the family have challenged standard descriptions and explanations of women's place in the family and of the relationship among gender, family, and society in different historical periods. Increasingly, marriage and family texts take into account feminist contributions to the family literature. Even so, bringing the new scholarship on gender into the family curriculum is not enough to provide a pluralistic view of family life.

ALTERNATIVES TO TRADITIONAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE FAMILY

Although we recognize that there is no single right way to organize a successful course or textbook on the sociology of the family, several elements should be incorporated to create a course that reflects the best sociology. In our view, such a course should include at least the following.

First and foremost, the basic premise is that family patterns are significant subjects of inquiry and that they are related in complex ways to social forces outside the family. We are wary of the recent criticism that feminist sociology emphasizes the macrosocietal constraints and the molding effects of social structure at the expense of micro-level perspectives (Chodorow and Thorne 1987, pp. 2–3), and we contend that emphasizing the profound impact of macrostructural forces on the microstructural world of the family is a necessary corrective analytical approach. This view, however, does not devalue the interplay between macro and micro levels of social organization. Indeed, when class and race are integrated into the analysis, we acquire fresh views of hierarchies that constrain families as well as a new understanding of strategies used by women, men, and children in varying circumstances to shape their lives in the face of restricted resources. Far from being deterministic, the new family sociology focuses on how people organize their intimate relationships as a consequence of the social forces that so strongly affect their interests, preferences, perceptions, choices, and other
behaviors. This approach is explicitly sociological, showing that family forms and the behaviors of family members are conditioned largely by structural influences rather than by the consequence of their biology, psychology, or culture.

Second, by asking how families and their members are related to the larger world, we can begin to unravel false generalizations and to reveal that in Margaret Andersen’s (1987) words, what is taken to be timeless, excellent, representative, or objective is embedded within patriarchal, white, middle-class assumptions about culture and society (p. 239). Barrie Thorne (1987) makes a similar point in showing how the experiences and interests of the privileged have shaped choices of topics, conceptual frameworks, and methods of study (p. 85). Consequently, by bringing knowledge back within the experiences of women, minorities, and those outside the middle class and by systematically examining their varied and unequal connections with society’s institutions, family sociologists can unmask the invisible patterns that guide the curriculum and can raise questions that require us to take a comprehensive and critical look at the field.

Third, a fully integrated study of the family requires “a critical perspective on prevalent ways of thinking about the family” (Thorne 1982, p. 8). We must examine the ideals and images, the myths and assumptions that exist both in the popular mind and in sociological conceptions of family life. The effort to transform students’ thinking about the family requires that the family be demythologized by examining the following predominant myths (Baca Zinn and Eitzen 1987, pp. 1–8):

1. The myth of the stable and harmonious family of the past.
2. The myth of separate worlds of work and family.
3. The myth of the monolithic family form.
4. The myth of an undifferentiated family experience.
5. The myth of family consensus.

This critical perspective sets the stage for reconceptualizing the family. Throughout the course, these myths should be addressed by using new knowledge to call into question assumptions, beliefs, and folk wisdom about “the way families are.” Standard explanations then can be refuted with new scholarship. Using new knowledge as a “reply to myth,” (Crosby 1985) requires us to incorporate several areas of scholarship, including Afro-American studies, Chicano studies, and other ethnic studies, as well as women’s studies, the new social history, and other fields of revisionist social science scholarship on social class, race, and gender. Often such materials from other disciplines are necessary to correct sociological generalizations that ignore family diversity.

Although family sociology itself is not free of ideals and images, myths, and assumptions, debunking myths about family and society is highly compatible with what many scholars define as the central mission of the social sciences. The demythologizing of society and the broadening of horizons are also at the center of good teaching. These goals can be accomplished by showing, for example, why the family is not necessarily the haven assumed in American cultural mythology. At the micro level, conflict is generated by female resistance to male domination and by the demands of work and economic hardship that can work against intimacy and companionship between spouses. The modern family is not always a tranquil institution, but is fraught with potential and actual conflict.

We can show that where the isolated nuclear family does exist, it has positive consequences for our economic system but can be quite negative for individuals. The economic system benefits when employers are able to move individuals from place to place without great disruption, and when they do not have to worry about satisfying the workers’ emotional needs. The system also benefits when the family is seen as a cultural refuge, because the larger society is left unchallenged. Because families have sole responsibility for maintaining a private refuge from an impersonal society and for providing personal fulfillment, the consequences for individuals can be negative; the demands are often too great. Families alone cannot meet all the emotional needs of their members, although their members try to fulfill these needs through consumerism, “the joy of sex,” and child-centered activities.

Thus the critical examination of the family is an important aspect of this approach. We should ask such questions as “How do families really work?” Who benefits under the existing arrangements and who does not?” This critical position is based on the assumption that the social world is human-made and therefore not sacred. Thus a keen sociological
analysis demystifies and demythologizes social life by ferreting out the existing myths, stereotypes, and dogmas. A critical position does not mean that families are incapable of being warm and loving places for humans. They can be, and sometimes they are, but for all of us family is characterized by duality, ambivalence, and conditions that may preclude the ideal of happiness for many people.

Finally, family sociology must integrate class, race, and gender into the analysis. Social stratification creates different relations, connections, and links among individuals, families, and society’s institutions. Family lives are conditioned by the varied social environments that people and families occupy; these social environments include unique historical and political events as well as economic conditions. The key to understanding the variations lies in the structural ties of families to community and society. Throughout history and in contemporary society, systems of racial and class control have necessitated various racial and class adaptations that often resulted in distinctive family patterns for the working class, blacks, Chicanos, Asian-Americans, and Native Americans. This approach differs from typical social science interpretations that explain diversity in terms of racial-ethnic cultures or social class traditions; such models do not explain why family patterns differ by race or by social class. Treating behavior as the result of culture or tradition amounts to little more than the tautology, “Families are different because their cultures are different.” It may be true, but it is not meaningful. Cultural and traditional differences are important, but they become fully meaningful only when they are related to other societal factors. Families are different, to be sure, but not simply because of ethnic, cultural, or class differences and not because of their attitudes and values regarding women, men, children, and work. Structural differences—differences in families’ relationship to society—are ultimately more important in ongoing family variations.

A structural analysis of racial and class variations avoids the simple assumption that cultural family norms are static traits passed down from generation to generation. It avoids “blaming the victims” for traits that differ from those of mainstream families.

By probing the effects of macrostructural conditions on families throughout society, we are forced to examine structures of social inequality. This approach integrates class and race into the study of the family. Thus class and race are not merely descriptive variables but theoretical categories that explain family shape and process by devoting specific attention to the relationship between stratification systems and patterns of family living. In addition, material on class, race, and gender should be visible throughout the course in relation to the “standard” family topics, rather than in segregated areas of the curriculum. Family members, whatever their gender, race, or class, must earn a living and must deal with matters of intimacy, marital power, marital conflict, childbearing, child rearing, divorce, and other family processes that occur over the life cycle.

The sociology of the family has been altered by major reconceptualizations about women, but this has not led to a full-fledged reconceptualization of the field. If women are included but if families in different parts of the social structure continue to be excluded, we are left with distorted and false images of the family. New scholarship on race and class that offers possibilities for reshaping the field must be brought into the curriculum. The process of paradigm shifting or “changes in the orienting assumptions and conceptual frameworks that are basic to the discipline” (Stacy and Thorne 1985, p. 302) has only begun. Changes in the reconstruction of the field lie ahead; the most important are the treatment of social class and race as theoretical categories and the incorporation of socially structured forms of family diversity into teaching and texts.

Every sociology course includes the primary goal of instilling the sociological perspective in the students’ analytical repertoires. The course on the sociology of family is an ideal setting in which students can engage in the critical analysis of social arrangements, demythologize and demystify social life, and come to understand the social sources of human behavior. This goal will not be achieved, however, unless the teachers and the textbooks in family sociology include the revisionist research by social historians and feminists, explain how families are related to the other institutions of society, and show how the major systems of stratification—class, race, and gender—affect families and family members differentially.
REFERENCES


Maxine Baca Zinn is Professor of Sociology at the University of Michigan-Flint. She is the co-author of DIVERSITY IN AMERICAN FAMILIES, (Harper and Row, 1987), and numerous articles on family and gender among racial-ethnics. She is co-editing a book on the interdependence of class, race, and gender in the lives of women of color in America. Address correspondence to Maxine Baca Zinn, Department of Sociology, University of Michigan-Flint, Flint, MI 48502.

D. Stanley Eitzen is Professor of Sociology at Colorado State University. He is the author of several sociology textbooks including IN CONFLICT AND ORDER: UNDERSTANDING SOCIOLOGY (Allyn and Bacon, 1988) and SOCIAL PROBLEMS (Allyn and Bacon, Fourth Edition, 1989), and the co-author of CRIMINOLOGY: CRIME AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE (John Wiley and Sons, 1985), and DIVERSITY IN AMERICAN FAMILIES (Harper and Row, 1987).