



Family: The Making of an Idea, an Institution, and a Controversy in American Culture

Betty G Farrell

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Assumptions about the family of the past pervade the expectations we bring to our personal interactions and shape the way we think about and study the family as a social institution. Most often, undergraduate courses in family sociology have a “marriage and family” focus, which emphasizes the dynamics of interpersonal relations and contemporary family roles. Similarly, sociological concerns focus on the present and the future of family life, with little attention to the past except as it provides a contrast with current experience. The research conducted by family historians over the past three decades challenges, modifies, and ultimately enriches sociological understandings about American family life today. By looking closely at the historical record, the author is able to debunk certain myths, such as the belief that the “ideal” family (male breadwinner and female domestic manager) has been historically prevalent; that the “traditional” family has been disintegrating in recent years; that the presumed breakdown of the family has left children more vulnerable than in the past. Drawing on and integrating this literature, then, allows students to develop new perspectives on contemporary social issues and reorients the kinds of questions sociologists bring to the study of family structures and processes.

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