INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF FAMILIES

1 FEMINIST RETHINKING FROM RACIAL-ETHNIC FAMILIES

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Understanding diversity remains a pressing challenge for family scholars. Innumerable shortcomings in dominant social science studies render much thinking ill-suited to the task. The growing diversity movement in women's studies, together with new thinking on racial-ethnic groups, holds the promise of a comprehensive understanding of family life.

THE FAMILY TRANSFORMATION IN WESTERN FEMINISM

Two decades of feminist thinking on the family have demystified the idea of the natural and timeless nuclear family. "By taking gender as a basic category of analysis" (Thorne 1992:5), feminist theory has produced new descriptions of family experience, new conceptualizations of family dynamics, and identified new topics for investigation. The following themes show how conventional notions of the family have been transformed:

1. The family is socially constructed. This means that it is not merely a biological arrangement but is a product of specific historical, social, and material conditions. In other words, it is shaped by the social structure.

2. The family is closely connected with other structures and institutions in society. Rather than being a separate sphere, it cannot be understood in isolation from outside factors. As a result, "the family" can be experienced differently by people in different social classes and of different races, and by women and men.

3. Since structural arrangements are abstract and often invisible, family processes can be deceptive or hidden. Many structural conditions make family life problematic. Therefore, families, like other social institutions, require changes in order to meet the needs of women, men, and children.

These themes have made great strides in challenging the myth of the monolithic family, "which has elevated the nuclear family with a breadwinner husband and a full-time wife and mother as the only legitimate family form" (Thorne 1992:4). Viewing family life within wider systems of economic and political structures has uncovered great complexity in family dynamics and important variation among families within particular racial and ethnic groups. Despite these advances, women of color theorists contend that Western feminists have not gone far enough in integrating racial differences into family studies.

DIFFERING FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON THE FAMILY

Issues that are rooted in racial (and class) differences have always produced debates within feminist scholarship. Racial differences have evoked deeply felt differences among feminists about the meaning of family life for women. Rayna Rapp's description of a typical feminist meeting about the family captured well the essence of the debate in the late 1960s and early 1970s:

> Many of us have been at an archetypical meeting in which someone stands up and asserts that the nuclear family ought to be abolished because it is degrading and constraining to women. Usually, someone else (often representing a third world position) follows on her heels, pointing out that the attack on the family represents a white middle-class position and that other women need their families for support and survival. (Rapp 1982:168)

Women of color feminists have disagreed with several feminist notions about the meaning of family life for women. As Patricia Zavella recounts the differences:

> In particular, we had problems with the separatist politics (automatically uncooperative with men) in some early women's organizations, and with the white middle-class focus of Americans' feminism, a focus implicitly and sometimes explicitly racist. . . . Both the lack of race and class consciousness in much 1970s feminist political and scholarly work came in for severe criticism. (Zavella 1991:316)

Western feminism became more contextual in the 1980s. As women of color continued to challenge the notion that gender produced a universal woman's family experience, feminism, in general, worked to broaden feminist studies beyond issues important to White, middle-class, heterosexual women (Ginsburg and Tsing 1990:3). Although gender remains the basic analytical category, scholars now acknowledge the relationships between families and other social divisions (Thorne 1992). The discovery that families are differentiated by race and class has had limited impact on family theorizing across groups. Feminist social scientists now routinely note the importance of race and class differences in family life. Yet we have been more successful in offering single studies of particular groups of families and women than in providing systematic comparisons of families in the same society. Although Western feminist thought takes great care to underscore race and class differences, it still marginalizes racial-ethnic families as special "cultural" cases. In other words, when it comes to thinking about family patterns, diversity is treated as if it were an intrinsic property of groups that are "different," rather than as being the product of forces that affect all families, but affect them in different ways. Feminism has taken on the challenge of diversity, yet it continues to treat race as epiphenomenal—in other words, to treat racial inequality and the social construction of race as secondary to gender (Zavella 1989:31). So far, mainstream feminism has failed to grapple with race as a power system that affects families throughout society and to apply that understanding to "the family" writ large. As Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1987) says, "Systematically incorporating hierarchies of race and class into the feminist reconstruction of the family remains a challenge, a necessary next step into the development of theories of family that are inclusive" (p. 368).

INCLUSIVE FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON RACE AND FAMILY

Families and household groups have changed over time and varied with social conditions. Distinctive political and economic contexts have created similar family histories for people of color. Composite portraits of each group show them to have family arrangements and patterns that differ from those of White Americans. Although each group is distinguishable from the others, African Americans, Latinos, and Asians share some important commonalities (Glenn and Yap 1993). These include an extended kinship structure and informal support networks spread across multiple households. Racial-ethnic families are distinctive not only because of their ethnic heritage but also because they reside in a society where racial stratification shapes family resources and structures in important ways.

New thinking about racial stratification provides a perspective for examining family diversity as a structural aspect of society. Race is a socially constructed system that assigns different worth and unequal treatment to groups on the basis of its definition of race. While racial definitions and racial meanings are always being transformed (Omi and Winant 1986), racial hierarchies operate as fundamental axes for the social location of groups and individuals and for the unequal distribution of social opportunities. Racial and ethnic groups occupy particular social locations in which family life is constructed out of widely varying social resources. The uneven distribution of social advantages and social costs operates to strengthen some families while simultaneously weakening others.

By looking at family life in the United States across time and in different parts of the social order, we find that social and economic forces in society have produced alternative domestic arrangements. The key to understanding family diversity lies in the relationship between making a living and maintaining life on a daily basis. Feminist scholars call these activities productive and reproductive labor (Brenner and Laslett 1986:117).

Productive Labor

Historically, racial differences in how people made a living had crucial implications for domestic life. In short, they produced different family and household arrangements on the part of slaves, agricultural workers, and industrial workers. European ethnics were incorporated into low-wage industrial economies of the North, while Blacks, Latinos, Chinese, and Japanese filled labor needs in the colonial labor system of the economically backward regions of the West, Southwest, and South. These colonial labor systems, while different, created similar hardships for family life. They required women to work outside of the home in order to maintain even minimal levels of family subsistence. Women's placement in the larger political economy profoundly influenced their family lives.

Several women of color theorists have advanced our understanding of the shaping power of racial stratification, not only for families of color but also for family life in general. For example, Bonnie Thornton Dill (1994) uncovers strong connections in the way racial meanings influence family life. In the antebellum United States, women of European descent received a certain level of protection within the confines of the patriarchal family. There is no doubt that they were constrained as individuals, but family life among European settlers was a highly valued aspect of societal development, and women—to the extent that they contributed to the development of families and to the economic growth of the nation—were provided institutional support for those

activities. Unlike White migrants, who came voluntarily, racial-ethnics either were brought to this country or were conquered to meet the need for a cheap and exploitable labor force. Little attention was given to their family and community life. Labor, and not the existence or maintenance of families, was the critical aspect of their role in building the nation.

Women of color experienced the oppression of a patriarchal society (public patriarchy) but were denied the protections and buffering of a patriarchal family (private patriarchy). Thus, they did not have the social structural support necessary to make their families a vital element in the social order. Family membership was not a key means of access to participation in the wider society. Families of women of color sustained cultural assaults as a direct result of the organization of the labor systems in which their groups participated. The lack of social, legal, and economic support for racial-ethnic families intensified and extended women's reproductive labor, created tensions and strains in family relationships, and set the stage for a variety of creative and adaptive forms of resistance.

Dill's study suggests a different conceptualization of the family, one that is not so bound by the notion of separate spheres of male and female labor or by the notion of the family as an emotional haven, separate and apart from the demands of the economic marketplace. People of color experienced no separation of work and family, no haven of private life, and no protected sphere of domesticity. Women's work outside of the home was an extension of their family responsibilities, as family members—women, men, and children—pooled their resources to put food on the table (Du Bois and Ruiz 1990:iii). What we see here are families and women who are buffeted by the demands of the labor force and provided no legal or social protection other than the maintenance of their ability to work. This research on women of color demonstrates that protecting one's family from the demands of the market is strongly related to the distribution of power and privilege in society. The majority of White settlers had the power to shelter their members from the market (especially their women and children), and to do so with legal and social support. People of color were denied these protections, and their family members were exploited and oppressed in order to maintain the privileges of the powerful. As Leith Mullings (1986) has said, "It was the working class and enslaved men and women whose labor created the wealth that allowed the middle class and upper middle class domestic lifestyles to exist" (p. 50).

Despite the harsh conditions imposed on family life by racial labor systems, families did not break down. Instead, they adapted as best they could. Using cultural forms where possible, and creating new adaptations where necessary, racial-ethnics adapted their families to the conditions thrust upon them. These adaptations were not exceptions to a "standard" family form. They were produced by forces of inequality in the larger society. Although the White middle-class model of the family has long been defined as the rule, it was neither the norm nor the dominant family type. It was, however, the measure against which other families were judged.

Reproductive Labor

Racial divisions in making a living shape families in important ways. They also determine how people maintain life on a daily basis. Reproductive labor is strongly gendered. It includes activities such as purchasing household goods, preparing and serving food, laundering and repairing clothing, maintaining furnishings and appliances, socializing children, providing care and emotional support for adults, and maintaining kin and

community ties (Glenn 1992:1). According to Evelyn Nakano Glenn, reproductive labor has divided along racial as well as gender lines. Specific characteristics of the division have varied regionally and changed over time—shifting parts of it from the household to the market:

> In the first half of the century racial-ethnic women were employed as servants to perform reproductive labor in white households, relieving white middle-class women of onerous aspects of that work; in the second half of the century, with the expansion of commodified services (services turned into commercial products or activities), racial-ethnic women are disproportionately employed as service work-ers in institutional settings to carry out lower-level "public" reproductive labor, while cleaner white collar supervisory and lower professional positions are filled by white women. (Glenn 1992:3)

The activities of racial-ethnic women in "public" reproductive labor suggest new interpretations of family formation. Knowing that reproductive labor has divided along racial lines offers an understanding of why the idealized family has often been a luxury of the privileged.

FAMILY PATTERNS AS RELATIONAL

The distinctive place assigned to racial-ethnic women in the organization of reproductive labor has far-reaching implications for thinking about racial patterns in family diversity. Furthermore, insights about racial divisions apply to White families as well as racial-ethnic families. The new research reveals an important *relational* dimension of family formation. "Relational means that race/gender categories are positioned and that they gain meaning in relation to each other" (Glenn 1992:34). As Bonnie Thornton Dill (1986) puts it, when we examine race, class, and gender simultaneously, we have a better understanding of a social order in which the privileges of some people are dependent on the oppression and exploitation of others (p. 16). This allows us to grasp the benefits that some women derive from their race and their class while also understanding the restrictions that result from gender. In other words, such women are subordinated by patriarchal family dynamics. Yet race and class intersect to create for them privileged opportunities, choices, and lifestyles. For example, Judith Rollins (1985) uses the relationships between Black domestics and their White employers to show how one class and race of women escapes some of the con-sequences of patriarchy by using the labor of other women. Her study, *Between Women,* highlights the complex linkages among race, class, and gender as they create both privilege and subordination. These are simultaneous processes that enable us to look at women's diversity from a different angle.

The relational themes of privilege and subordination appear frequently in studies of domestic service (Romero 1992). Victoria Byerly (1986) found that White women who worked in the Southern textile mills hired African Americans as domestic workers. The labor of these domestics enabled the White women to engage in formal work. Vicki Ruiz (1988) describes how Mexican American women factory workers in Texas have eased their housework burdens by hiring Mexican domestic workers (Ward 1990:10–11). These stud-ies highlight some of the ways in which race relations penetrate households, intersecting with gender arrangements to produce varied family experiences.

THEORIZING ACROSS RACIAL CATEGORIES

Historical and contemporary racial divisions of productive and reproductive labor challenge the assumption that family diversity is the outgrowth of different cultural patterns. Racial stratification creates distinctive patterns in the way families are located and embedded in different social environments. It structures social opportunities differently, and it constructs and positions groups in systematic ways. This offers important lessons for examining current economic and social changes that are influencing families, and influencing them differently. Still, the knowledge that family life differs significantly by race does not preclude us from theorizing across racial categories.

The information and service economy continues to reshape family life by altering patterns associated with marriage, divorce, childbearing, and household composition. A growing body of family research shows that although some families are more vulnerable than others to economic marginalization, none are immune from the deep structural changes undermining "traditional" families. Adaptation takes varying forms, such as increased divorce rates, female-headed households, and extended kinship units. Although new patterns of racial formation will affect some families more than others, looking at social contexts will enable us to better understand family life in general.

The study of Black families can generate important insights for White families (Billingsley 1988). Families may respond in a like manner when impacted by larger social forces. To the extent that White families and Black families experience similar pressures, they may respond in similar ways, including the adaptation of their family structures and other behaviors. With respect to single-parent families, teenage parents, working mothers, and a host of other behaviors, Black families serve as barometers of social change and as forerunners of adaptive patterns that will be progressively experienced by the more privileged sectors of US society.

On the other hand, such insights must not eclipse the ways in which racial meanings shape social perceptions of family diversity. As social and economic changes produce new family arrangements, some alternatives become more tolerable. Race plays an important role in the degree to which alternatives are deemed acceptable. When alternatives are associated with subordinate social categories, they are judged against "the traditional family" and found to be deviant. Many alternative lifestyles that appear new to middle-class Americans are actually variant family patterns that have been traditional within Black and other ethnic communities for many generations. Presented as the "new lifestyles of the young mainstream elite, they are the same lifestyles that have in the past been defined as pathological, deviant, or unacceptable when observed in Black families" (Peters and McAdoo 1983:228). As Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1992) observes, race often subsumes other sets of social relations, making them "good" or "bad," "correct" or "incorrect" (p. 255). Yet, many of the minority family patterns deemed "incorrect" by journalists, scholars, and policymakers are logical life choices in a society of limited social opportunities.

GROWING RACIAL DIVERSITY AND "THE FAMILY CRISIS"

Despite the proliferation of studies showing that families are shaped by their social context, conservative rhetoric is fueling a "growing social and ideological cleavage between traditional family forms and the emerging alternatives" (Gerson 1991:57). This is complicated

further by the profound demographic transformation now occurring in the United States. The unprecedented growth of minority populations is placing a special spotlight on family diversity.

Racial minorities are increasing faster than the majority population. During the 1980s Asians more than doubled, from 3.5 to 7.3 million, and Hispanics grew from 14.6 to 22.4 million. The Black increase was from 16.5 to 30.0 million. The result of these trends is that whereas Whites in 1980 were 80 percent of the population, they will be only 70 percent by 2000 (Population Reference Bureau 1989:10). Immigration now accounts for a large share of the nation's population growth. The largest ten-year wave of immigration in US history occurred during the 1980s, with the arrival of almost 9 million people. More immigrants were admitted during the 1980s than in any decade since 1900–1910. By 2020, immigrants will be more important to the US population growth than natural increase (Waldrop 1990:23). New patterns of immigration are changing the racial composition of society. Among the expanded population of first-generation immigrants, "the Asian-born now outnumber the European-born. Those from Latin America—predominantly Mexican— outnumber both" (Barringer 1992:2). This contrasts sharply with what occurred as recently as the 1950s when two-thirds of legal immigrants were from Europe and Canada.

Changes in the racial composition of society are creating new polarizations along residential, occupational, educational, and economic lines. Crucial to these divisions is an ongoing transformation of racial meaning and racial hierarchy. Family scholars must be alert to the effects of these changes because the racial repositioning will touch families throughout the racial order.

New immigration patterns will escalate the rhetoric of family crises as immigrant lifestyles and family forms are measured against a mythical family ideal. Inevitably, some interpretations of diversity will revert to cultural explanations that deflect attention from the social opportunities associated with race. Even though pleas for "culturally sensitive" approaches to non-White families are well-meaning, they can unwittingly keep "the family" ensnared in a White middle-class ideal. We need to find a way to transcend the conflict among the emerging array of "family groups" (Gerson 1991:57). The best way to do this is to abandon all notions that uphold one family form as normal and others as "cultural variations." Immigration will undoubtedly introduce alternative family forms; they will be best understood by treating race as a fundamental structure that situates families differently and thereby produces diversity.