**CHAPTER ONE**

***IMAGES, IDEALS, AND MYTHS***

**CHAPTER OVERVIEW**

The authors acknowledge the difficulty of understanding the recent transformations of family life in the United States. Our perceptions and expectations of families tend to be highly subjective because they are based more on cultural ideals and myths than on knowledge. Baca Zinn, Eitzen and Wells examine these ideals and myths to differentiate between family imagery and family reality. Their goal is to expose the mythical ideals that influence perceptions and replace these myths with an understanding of the historical, social, economic, and cultural forces that create families.

**CHAPTER OUTLINE**

I. IMAGES AND IDEALS

The authors identify three distinct images of families in U.S. society. These images portray the family as a primary route for the achievement of personal growth and self-fulfillment. The first two images are positive while the third suggests that achieving satisfaction through family life may come at too high a cost.

A. Family as Haven - This image revolves around the themes of love and protection. The family provides a safe-haven from the threats and dangers of modern society. This image emerged during industrialization.

B. Family as Fulfillment - The protective image of the family has largely been replaced by a compensatory image. Family provides satisfactions unattainable through other social arrangements. Family members can find self-fulfillment and enjoyment through their joint activities. Family images in advertising emphasize families as fun, rather than a moral obligation.

C. Family as Encumbrance - The positive image of the compensatory family has given rise to a negative image of the family as encumbrance. Components of family life, such as monogamy and childrearing, are often viewed as inhibiting self-expression and personal freedom.

D. Images and Reality - In these three images, relationships between husbands and wives and between parents and children have been highly idealized. Further, family and society appear polarized. These largely mythical constructs shape our assumptions about family life, often engendering feelings of guilt and anger when reality falls short of expectation.

II. THE MYTHICAL AMERICAN FAMILY

Family images and ideals are closely related to several widely accepted myths about the family that exist in our society. They reflect nostalgia, normative cultural prescriptions, and selective perception.

A. The Myth of a Stable and Harmonious Family of the Past - It is thought that families of the past were more stable and happier than those of today. Yet current problems that seem to threaten the well-being of the family as a social institution existed in the past as well.

B. The Myth of Separate Worlds - The image of the family as haven emerged out of the belief that work and family roles were mutually exclusive. In fact, the public world - private world split is a false dichotomy. The family is deeply embedded in social and economic structures; society intrudes on every aspect of family life. The recent increase in women's labor force participation has heightened the connection between families and other institutions, thereby demythologizing the public-private dichotomy.

C. The Myth of the Monolithic Family Form - The supposed "typical" U.S. family consists of three elements: 1) the family is a nuclear unit; 2) it consists of a mother, father, and their children; and 3) it exhibits a sexual division of labor, featuring a breadwinner father and a full-time wife and mother. In reality, this monolithic model accounts for only seven percent of U.S. families. Increasing diversity in U.S. family types follows from social and economic transformations that have contributed to the influx of married women with young children into the labor force, new patterns of marriage and divorce, and the decline in the numbers of children women bear.

D. The Myth of a Unified Family Experience - This myth assumes that all family members have common needs, interests, and experiences. But decomposing the family along gender and age lines shows that the gender and age systems produce different realities for men and women as well as children and adults within the same family.

E. The Myth of Family Consensus - This idealized image of family life assumes that families operate on the principles of harmony and love. This myth ignores the contradictions that are intrinsic to family life due to power relations, competition, and the intense emotional quality of family life. Love and conflict exist together

in family life. The emotional intensity of family life can, and often does, generate violence.

F. The Myth of Family Decline as the Cause of Social Problems - Some social commentators find that change in family patterns in recent decades, especially the increase in fatherless families, is the primary cause of contemporary social problems. This claim is flawed in two respects: first, it treats the family as a causal agent, rather than a reflection of social conditions; second, it ignores structural reasons for family breakdown.

III. A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING FAMILIES

A. The Sociological Perspective - Sociology focuses on the structural sources of family life. Two sociological principles are used throughout this text. The first is that there is a close relationship between families and the larger society that shapes them; this text studies the macro level, the micro level, and the connections between the two. Second, this text adopts a critical stance toward all social arrangements; it views social inequality as a key determinant of family diversity.

B. The Paradigm Shift in Family Studies - The dominant approach for understanding families has been a functionalist model that posited the modern nuclear family as the basis of social organization and cohesion in society. New ideas about pluralism, diversity, and social context have challenged that model and are dramatically changing the family field. The shift in family sociology has been so pronounced that one scholar calls this stage a “Big Bang”—a dramatic period of diversification in family studies.

C. The Structural Diversity Approach - Baca Zinn, Eitzen, and Wells use a structural diversity approach for understanding families. This framework incorporates the following themes:

1. Family forms are socially constructed and historically changing.

2. Family diversity is produced by the very structures that organize society as a whole.

3. The social locations in which families are embedded are not the product of a single power system, but are shaped by intersecting hierarchies.

4. Family diversity is constructed through social structure and human agency.

5. Understanding families means challenging monolithic ideas that conceive of the family in idealistic ways.

**CLASS ACTIVITIES/PROJECTS**

1. A good way to encourage students to think about their own families as they proceed through this course is to assign the construction of a genogram. A three generation genogram is recommended, including for each member dates of birth and death, place of birth, divorce, and occupation. The context for this project is diversity: we expect to find families configured in different ways. This assignment might be difficult for an occasional student due to her/his family circumstances. Allow for an alternative assignment in special cases.

2. An interesting group project is analyzing the content of images and ideas about the family as presented in popular magazines. Break the class into work groups and assign each a particular magazine to analyze. Include "family centered" magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* and *Family Circle*, children's magazines such as *Highlights*, and magazines focused on either men or women such as *Ms* or *GQ*. What do the advertisements look like? How many articles, if any, focus on family? Are the images and articles biased toward any particular type of family? Discuss findings in class.

3. As an in-class activity, watch a current television program portraying family life. Afterward, discuss questions such as these: Do we see the family as a gendered institution? Do we see family members experiencing family in different ways? How do men spend their time? How do women spend their time? How are children's gender differences portrayed?

**FILM/VIDEO SUGGESTIONS**

1. *The Farmer's Wife* (390 min. on 3 tapes, PBS, 1998). This documentary follows a White rural family with three children as they struggle to save their farm. This series illustrates several important themes of the test, including myths and images of family life, his and her marriage, and the family effects of economic distress.

2. *Family Values: An American Tragedy* (56 min., Filmmakers Library, 1996). This film documents a clash of family myths with family realities as we follow lesbian video maker Pam Walton's attempt to reconcile with her father, a right wing fundamentalist and "family values" activist.

3. *Values and the Traditional Family* (15 min., Insight Media, 1994). Historian Stephanie Coontz contends that the idealized traditional family never existed.

4. *Variations on a Theme (Family Types)* (20 min., Insight Media, 1988). This video contrasts traditional definitions of the family as a nuclear unit with contemporary family pluralism.

5. *Celebrating the American Family* (60 min., PBS, 1992). This video presents a montage of photographs, diaries, letters, and oral histories that traces family change since the Civil War.