Chapter 1

Images, Ideals, and Myths

Sociology 325
Chapter One Overview

- Images and ideals of the American family
- The mythical American family
- A new framework for understanding families
Images And Ideals

- The Family as Haven:
  The family provides a safe-haven from the threats and dangers of the modern world

- The Family as Fulfillment:
  The family provides satisfactions unattainable through other social arrangements
Images And Ideals

- The Family as Encumbrance:
  A negative image of the family in which components of family life are viewed as inhibiting self-expression and personal freedom

- Images and Reality:
  Relations amongst family members are highly idealized and can lead to disappointment, guilt, or anger when reality falls short of expectations
The Mythical American Family

- Myth of a Stable and Harmonious Family of the Past:
  Families of the past are idealized as being more stable and happier than today’s families. However, the family has faced adverse problems throughout history.

- Myth of Separate Worlds:
  The image of the family as haven emerged out of the belief that work and family roles were mutually exclusive. However the family is deeply imbedded in social and economic structures.
The Mythical American Family

- Myth of the Monolithic Family Form:
  alleged ‘typical’ family: 1) a nuclear unit, 2) consisting of a mother, father and children, 3) has a sexual division of labor with a breadwinner father and full-time wife and mother. In reality this describes only 10% of American Families.

- Myth of a Unified Family Experience:
  Assumes that all family members have common needs, interests, and experiences. In reality each member experiences the family differently.
The Mythical American Family

- Myth of Family Consensus:
  Idealized image of the family that assumes families operate on the principles of harmony and love.

- Family Decline as the Cause of Social Problems:
  The suggestion that recent changes in family patterns is a primary cause of contemporary social problems.
A New Framework for Understanding Families

- The Sociological Perspective:
  - Focuses on the structural sources of family life
  - There is a close relationship between families and the larger society that shapes them
  - Social inequality is a key determinant of family diversity.
The Changing Functionalist Model:

- The dominant approach for understanding families has been a functionalist model.
- This model placed the nuclear family as the basis of social organization and cohesion in society.
- New ideas about pluralism, diversity, and social context have challenged that model.
The Structural Diversity Approach:

- Family forms are socially constructed and historically changing.
- Family diversity is produced by the very structures that organize society as a whole.
The Structural Diversity Approach:

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

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

- The structural diversity model draws from many scholarly fields including history, economics, anthropology, women’s studies, African American studies, and psychology.