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## CHAPTER 15

# Social Conflict Theories of the Family

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## Introduction

Almost 15 years ago, the senior author of this chapter and another sociologist, Joyce Elliott Foss, presented a paper entitled, "In Search of the 'Missing' Conceptual Framework in Family Sociology: The Social Conflict Framework," at the annual meetings of the National Council on Family Relations (Farrington and Foss, 1977). The central thesis of this paper was that it was finally time to "officially discover" the social conflict approach to the study of the family—an approach that seemed to us to be very much implicit within and relevant to the field of family studies. It was our sense that all of the necessary ingredients for such an approach were present and that most of the really difficult work of laying out the parameters of the successful application of principles and concepts of a social conflict perspective on social reality to the study of the family had already been accomplished. All that was really left to do, in our opinion, was to formally recognize the value and the legitimacy of this approach—as had been

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done systematically with a variety of other theoretical approaches in previous works (Christensen, 1964; Hill and Hansen, 1960; Nye and Berardo, 1966)—and to put it in its rightful place as one of the most important and useful of the theoretical perspectives available to students of the family.

In looking back over what has happened within the field of family studies since that time, however, it is not altogether clear that the promise that we saw for the social conflict approach to the study of the family has been realized. In fact, at a number of key points during the past several decades, the social conflict perspective has been described (and generally dismissed) as "prominent in *some circles*" (italics ours), "a minor theoretical approach," and "not very important in the study of the family," by family experts engaged in surveying important theoretical developments within their discipline (Broderick, 1971; Holman and Burr, 1980; Thomas and Wilcox, 1987, respectively). Clearly, if these scholars have been correct in their reading of the field, there is good reason to question whether the social conflict approach to the study of the family—while no longer "missing," perhaps—has ever really fulfilled what once appeared to us to be its considerable potential.

We seek to answer that question in this chapter, and we will work toward this objective in the

following fashion. First, we will discuss the development of a “social conflict approach to the study of the family,” focusing in particular on the peculiar obstacles that the social conflict perspective faced in successfully “breaking into” the field of family studies and the difficulties that it experienced in gaining genuine and lasting acceptance among mainstream family scholars. We will conclude that we have, in all likelihood, been witnessing a gradual decline in the utilization of this perspective in recent years (at least, as a major vehicle for theorization about and research on the family); however, we will explain this occurrence as the combined result of (1) the unusually eclectic internal nature of the family conflict perspective, which developed during the late 1960s and 1970s, coupled with (2) the gradual emergence of several other theoretical perspectives within the field of family studies, which share much in common substantively with the social conflict approach but are more appealing to various constituents on ideological grounds. Finally, we will conclude by arguing that, whatever its future may be as an important approach to the study of the family, social conflict theory has made a significant and lasting set of contributions to the field of family studies—contributions that would not have been possible if it were not for the successful emergence of a viable “family conflict perspective” during the past 20 years.

Before we move on to an evaluation of the place that social conflict theory occupies within the field of family studies, however, it is important that our readers share with us a rudimentary understanding of where this approach to the study of social reality has come from historically. With this in mind, we turn now to a brief consideration of several of the most important substantive roots of the social conflict perspective.

### The Historical Origins of a Social Conflict Theory of the Family

If we were to systematically look at the thoughts and writings of those who are commonly regarded as the most outstanding contributors to human intellectual history, we would find that virtually all of these individuals have had something to say about the phenomenon of “social conflict” (a fact that seemingly says something about the absolutely fundamental nature of this aspect of

human social existence). For this reason, there is necessarily a certain amount of frustration inherent within any attempt to provide a relatively meaningful, yet concise, summary of the diverse body of thought generally referred to as “social conflict theory.”

Our way of responding to this frustration in this particular essay has been to limit our discussion of the historical roots of social conflict theory to several basic themes that we believe to be absolutely critical to a social conflict conception of the family.<sup>1</sup> These themes are the following: (1) the tendency toward conflict as a basic element of human nature; (2) conflict, competition, and the struggle for scarce resources; (3) the Marxian theory of conflict as a basic structural condition of society; (4) Freud’s psychoanalytic model of intrapsychic conflict; (5) Weber’s speculation on the nature of the relationship(s) between conflict and power; and (6) the possible integrative social functions that conflict provides for the larger social order.

#### Conflict and Human Nature

We begin this brief history with Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), who, in the course of his career, wrote two works, *The Discourses* (1531/1948) and *The Prince* (1532/1948), expressing his views on conflict and statecraft, and with Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), who, over a century later, published *Leviathan* (1651/1947), also concerned with statecraft. Central to the views of both of these men was a belief in a distinctive conception of human nature and its importance to an understanding of the state. Both saw the basic character of human nature as producing a continuous condition of conflict among men (and women), since all individual actors exhibit pure self-interest, unless controlled by the state.

The reader who is interested in investigating in greater detail the historical origins and substantive content of social conflict theory is encouraged to consult the appropriate sections of the following general theory texts, all of which contain excellent treatments of this topic: Don M. Lindale’s (1981) *The Nature and Types of Sociological Theory*; James T. Duce’s (1976) *Conflict and Power in Social Life*; Jonathan H. Turner’s (1991) *The Structure of Sociological Theory* (fifth edition); George Ritzer’s (1988) *Sociological Theory* (second edition); and Randall Collins’s (1988) *Theoretical Sociology*.

Machiavelli saw in human nature insatiable desires, and he characterized the human actor as fierce, ungrateful, deceitful, and greedy for gain. Many of these qualities derived from a limited capacity to achieve because of the inescapable fact of economic scarcity. Hunger and poverty, he reasoned, make men industrious while laws make men good.

Hobbes did not itemize all of the obnoxious traits in detail, as Machiavelli had. Instead, he argued that, left in their “natural” state, because they are naturally equal in body and mind, individuals hope to achieve what their peers achieve, both in the material goods of life and in power and esteem. These desires put people continually in conflict with one another and as a result life is, in Hobbes’ language, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

The contributions of Machiavelli and Hobbes to intellectual history lie not only in their critical views of human nature but, more importantly, in the strategy that each thinker devised for organizing the state, so as to control and make productive use of this essentially unattractive human potential. Their thinking thus demonstrates the possibility that structural entities can be created that will make stable and orderly social life possible, even when that condition is not the natural human inclination.

#### Competition over Scarce Resources

The work for which Thomas Malthus (1766–1834) is still most widely known is his *Essay on the Principle of Population*, which first appeared in 1798 (1798/1894). This book expressed Malthus’s theory that population inescapably outgrows subsistence, and that this discrepancy between population size and the ability to adequately meet the basic subsistence needs of all of the members of that population “naturally” produces a fundamental struggle for existence, in which some flourish at the expense of others.

Charles Darwin’s (1809–1882) most important contribution to the field of biology, described in his treatise, *On the Origin of Species* (1859/1958), was to apply Malthus’s observation that plants and animals multiply faster than nature can provide for them to his own analysis of the process of “evolution”—the notion that different forms of life develop gradually from a common ancestry. Combining these elements, Darwin pro-

posed that the factors of “the struggle for existence” and “the survival of the fittest” are the central mechanisms on which evolution is based. In this sense, then, Darwin introduced the possibility that conflict and struggle are biological phenomena, which are absolutely central to human social existence.

A number of more contemporary social thinkers were influenced by Darwin and continued this particular version of the conflict perspective, commonly referred to as social Darwinism, into the twentieth century. Thus, for example, Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), an influential English social theorist, applied these ideas of the natural process of conflict and survival of the fittest to his notion of social evolution (1898), while William Graham Sumner (1840–1910), an American sociologist, saw the competition for survival among individual actors as operating about fundamental advances in the quality of human social life overall (1883).

#### The Marxian Theory of Conflict

We turn next to a social thinker, Karl Marx (1818–1883), who presented a systematic theory of society and its evolution in which conflict plays a significant and integrated role (Marx, 1867/1967; Marx & Engels, 1845–1846/1930a; 1848/1930b). Indeed, a number of the basic concepts most central to many more contemporary variations of social conflict theory, for example, “economic determinism,” “class struggle,” and “dialectical materialism,” to name but a few, find their germinal development in Marx’s theoretical scheme.

Like many of his peers in nineteenth-century Germany, Marx was much influenced by the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (Waldace, 1931). In fact, much of Marx’s own work represents a transformation of Hegel’s idealistic philosophical scheme into a concrete, materialistic system of thought. As a result, Marx shares with Hegel a number of important ideas about the nature of reality, among them beliefs in (1) the inherent quality of conflict within human relations, (2) the contradictory nature of human existence, and (3) the value of the dialectic (i.e., a dynamic worldview that sees reality as necessarily progressing through the stages of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis) as a way of envisioning human thought and action.

As Marx stated at the very beginning of his *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (which he wrote with his close friend and collaborator, Friedrich Engels), "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (1848/1930b, p. 9). The concept of "class" is central to Marx's theory in a number of ways, one of the most important being that it reflects his materialist view of man, according to which human actors can be seen to produce themselves through work. Marx believed this to be a creative (transforming) process in which the individual and the world are simultaneously and continually in the process of becoming. It is only when human history reaches the stage of communism that this process will be transformed from one in which man participates, but does not control or direct, to a stage of self-directed and conscious materialism.

According to Marx's historical materialism, societies develop through a series of progressive states, beginning with a primitive period, followed by ancient, feudal, and capitalist stages, and ending with the communist period, which is the final state of human social development. This sequence is not adventitious; it is necessitated by man's technological development, which arises from his essential human nature as an animal which actively creates its own environment.

Of critical importance to the Marxian scheme is the observation that each of these stages of history, except for the first and the last, is an exploitative system. That is, in each, there are two fundamental groups of people: (1) workers, variously called slaves, serfs, and laborers, and (2) those who own the means of production (i.e., the land, factories, and machines). Exploitation is achieved by the owners in these economic systems through a variety of mechanisms, all of which share in common that they serve to extract "surplus value" from the labor of those who work. As each of these systems matures technologically, however, the workers who have been heretofore individualized come to recognize their common cause, through the development of "class consciousness," and thus join forces. As a result, the society is transformed (revolutionized) into the next stage of history through the fundamental mechanism of class struggle.

Until that time that the class struggle is successful in overthrowing the present social order, however, the workers in each of the property-owning epochs are not only dominated and ex-

ploited, but also psychologically traumatized—in Marx's language, "alienated." Indeed, Marx saw this condition of alienation as multifaceted and total, as man ultimately becomes separated from product, fellow worker, and, finally, himself.

Another important aspect of social conflict for Marx is the increasing contradiction between the technological maturity, which occurs irresistibly, and the productive (i.e., property) relations, which owners manipulate to resist further technological development and thus maintain their control over the present social order. To Marx, then, owners are not only exploitative in a direct sense (e.g., as employers, owners, and producers) but also as a "ruling class," operating through the institutional systems of society to pursue and further their own economic self-interest. Thus, to Marx, political power was simply an extension of economic power, and economic hegemony is also political hegemony.

We may sum up the significance of the productive forces of society for a conflict perspective in the following fashion. The technological state of development of a society serves to produce a certain type of owner and a certain type of worker, and this in turn results in a certain type of economic organization. More generally, however, this economic system also gives rise to a particular type of political order, as well as congenial forms of legal, educational, and familial order; in sum, an entire cultural system, all of which works to the ultimate and overall benefit of those who control the means of production. Hence, the notion of "economic determinism."

Before leaving the Marxian formulation of social conflict, we must make at least brief mention of another set of ideas, which, although not proposed directly by Marx, was advanced by his friend and associate, Frederick Engels (1820-1905). Indeed, Engels's work, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884/1942), bears directly on the subject of this particular chapter, as he took the basic materialist notion of social conflict, which is the core of Marxian theory, and applied it to the topic of the family and the nature of the male-female relationships that exist therein.

It was Engels's thesis that the superordinate and subordinate positions "enjoyed" by men and women, respectively, in modern society could be seen as directly analogous to the positions occupied by the bourgeoisie (capitalists) and pro-

letarians (workers) in relationship to the capitalist means of production. Moreover, these two systems of class and gender inequality were seen by Engels as sharing a similar relationship to the institution of private property, which is one of the basic foundations of a capitalist economic system.

### Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory and Conflict

Although they deal with very different levels of social reality and base their speculations about conflict and its relationship(s) to the human condition on fundamentally dissimilar concepts and ways of thinking, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) can be seen to share in common with Karl Marx the fact that his treatment of conflict is embedded within a complex theoretical system. This system is presented in such works as *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930/1946) and A. A. Brill's (1938) compilation, *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*.

In Freud's theoretical scheme, the individual—the psyche in its beginning—contains all the primordial stuff of the animal. It is pure self-interest, in pursuit of which it is prepared to employ any and all aggressive (and other) means necessary to secure its wishes. It brooks no delay and tolerates no obstacle. That is how each of us enters the world.

However, Freud sees this pure animal as beginning its life as a small, weak, and helpless creature, so that, despite its imperious demands, it is not yet dangerous to society. During this autocratic infancy period, the initial socialization of this impulsive infant occurs through a phenomenon that Freud termed "the Oedipus process." In brief, this is a process whereby the normative structure of the society is internalized by the infant through the agency of the father and mother. As a result, the child acquires a conscience, which includes not only the appropriate moral rules but also the permanent internalized parental threat, which he/she, the child, wields against him/herself.

But that is not the end of the matter. The psyche, in the course of the developmental process that is occurring, differentiates into a conscious and an unconscious part, with the latter continuing to contain, in addition to other material, libidinous impulses as well as the tendency toward aggressiveness alluded to above. These li-

bidinous impulses are the sexual forces that express themselves, not only in carnal form, but in any form of affection or sociability that binds us to others and makes society possible. As Freud viewed matters, then, each of us is a battleground of libidinal and aggressive conflicting forces, both intra- and extramural.

### The Importance of Power

Although not always thought of as a "conflict theorist," the German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) made fundamental and important contributions to the consideration of the place of conflict in social life (Duke, 1976, pp. 37-72). Weber's primary focus was on the concept of "power"—"the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance" (Weber, 1947, pp. 152-153)—and how power is related both to social conflict and social order.

Although Weber shared with many of the thinkers that we have already discussed the assumption that human societies are comprised of a multitude of individuals and groups who are continually engaged in relationships of actual or potential conflict, he also recognized that social order, rather than open and disruptive conflict, prevails in the majority of social settings. He explained this fact as resulting from the institutionalization and legitimation of the power that some actors hold over others, such that the majority of the members of the larger social system are motivated to act in ways that contribute to order and stability, rather than disruption and instability.

Thus, for Weber, as for many other conflict theorists, power—and more specifically the way(s) in which power is distributed—is a critical element of human social existence. However, its relationship to social order is not necessarily a destructive one. To the contrary, under appropriate conditions, power may actually prove to be one of the fundamental bulwarks of that order that exists, even in social systems in which the potential for conflict is seemingly great.

### Conflict as an Integrative Social Force

Implicit in several of the conflict theories that we have discussed thus far has been the general

notion that various social benefits may result from the presence of conflict within the social order. Thus for example, Spencer and Sumner were seen to view competition and conflict as mechanisms helping to foster the social evolution of humankind and its societies; Marx was seen as viewing conflict as a driving force operating through the course of history to bring about genuine equality and the realization of human potential; and Weber was seen to view some of the ways in which conflict is dealt with as contributing to social order. This idea of the potentially positive consequences of social conflict, however, is perhaps expressed most clearly and directly by the German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858-1918), who published several important works on the place of conflict in social life (1904, 1908, 1955).

To Simmel, the "sociations" (forms of interaction) that are the basis of social life always involve both harmony and conflict, attraction and repulsion. An entirely harmonious group could not exist, in Simmel's eyes, since it would remain entirely static. Moreover, conflict also serves to define and solidify the unity of the groups involved, both internally, and in relationship to one another.

Simmel's conception of social reality can thus be seen to be essentially "dualistic," in the sense that *both* tendencies toward order and tendencies toward conflict are inevitable and critical components of man's social existence. As described by social theorist, James Duke, "[As seen by Simmel] Unifying and conflicting processes both operate in every social group, and any separation of the two is arbitrary and abstract" (1976, p. 99).

### Social Conflict Theory and American Social Science

This survey of the vicissitudes of the concept of social conflict as a theoretical perspective has, of necessity, been superficial and it is by no means exhaustive. From it, however, we can see that the conflict perspective has ranged in its application all the way from the thoughts and behaviors of individual actors to the macrolevel characteristics of entire societies. It has considered conflict to be a human motivation, a structural condition, and a social process. It has examined conflict in terms of its positive as well as its negative consequences.

Out of the thoughts and ideas of the persons that we have just discussed, as well as many other important thinkers too numerous to mention in this brief review, there has developed over the past 150 years a relatively cohesive set of concepts, assumptions, and propositions that is generally referred to as "social conflict theory." This theoretical perspective can be seen to represent a more-or-less distinctive worldview with characteristic positions on such substantive matters as human nature, interpersonal relationships, the historical development of the human species, and the structure of society.

Despite the deep and diverse roots of this social conflict perspective and the many fundamental aspects of human social life on which it seemingly touches, however, the sociologist Jessie Bernard (1950) was able to ask, quite legitimately, at mid-century, "Where is the sociology of modern conflict?" The answer to her question can be found in the social, political, and ideological climates of American society at the time that made major clashes between conflict theory and prevailing American intellectual thought almost inevitable and prevented the conflict perspective from making substantial inroads into mainstream American social science until the mid- to late 1950s.

One of the primary reasons for this hesitation to embrace the principles of social conflict theory is the fact that this intellectual tradition was equated by many Americans with such objectionable (at least, from the standpoint of predominant American values) political ideologies as fascism, socialism, and communism. The fact that the German Karl Marx was so prominent within the social conflict tradition, coupled with the biting nature of Marxist and neo-Marxist critiques of the very foundations of the capitalist way of life that in American society, made this a generally untenable theoretical perspective in post-World War II America.

In addition, the predominant school of thought within American social science at that time—structural-functionalism (e.g., Davis & Moore, 1945; Merton, 1949; Parsons, 1951)—served to buttress the prevailing social order, as it emphasized the existence and importance of such basic social phenomena as value consensus, shared goals, and cooperation between the basic components of society at the same time that it tended to ignore such seemingly disruptive social phenomena as conflict. For this reason as well, then,

conflict principles remained largely the province of revolutionary critics of "America," and "radical" intellectuals on the boundaries of academia.

The ignoring of a social phenomenon as basic to the human condition as social conflict and a theoretical scheme as provocative and insightful as social conflict theory, however, could not continue forever, and beginning in the mid-1950s, influential writings utilizing basic conflict principles began to appear in the mainstream social science literature. For example, in 1956, the well-known and respected social theorist, Lewis Coser, wrote a book entitled *The Functions of Social Conflict*. Although it looked at and used the concept of conflict in a manner that was basically consistent with the long-standing functionalist tradition, Coser's work did have the effect of elevating social conflict to a place of prominence; in addition, it served to reintroduce (or, in some cases, to introduce for the first time) some of the important ideas of Georg Simmel to American social scientists.

At around this same time, the sociologist C. Wright Mills was also writing about contemporary issues in a way that clearly suggested the application of a social conflict perspective, even if Mills did not identify himself by that specific label. Mills attacked the basic political structure of American society in his book, *The Power Elite* (1956), and he offered a scathing indictment of prevailing intellectual ideas in a subsequent work, *The Sociological Imagination* (1959).

Also of critical importance at this time was the work of Ralf Dahrendorf (1958a,b, 1959). Dahrendorf was a German sociologist who developed a theory of social conflict based on Marxian principles. Although his was not a conscious attempt to wed the principles of functionalism and social conflict—to the contrary, he explicitly rejected the idea of looking at the social world solely through functionalist principles—"in the end," according to George Ritzer (1988, p. 188), "this conflict theory looked more like a mirror image of structural functionalism than a Marxian theory of conflict." In fact, quite ironically, this basic similarity of Dahrendorf's thinking to the functionalism that he wished to reject may actually have fostered the acceptance of the principles of conflict theory among American social scientists, since it "sounded so much like structural functionalism that it was palatable to mainstream sociologists" (Ritzer, 1988, p. 188).

At the same time that these social conflict ideas and thinkers were gaining prominence, the structural-functionalist perspective was reeling from a series of severe and diverse criticisms that it had been receiving from scholars in a variety of social science disciplines (e.g., Barber, 1956; Davis, 1959; Hempel, 1959; Mills, 1959; Nagel, 1953; Wrong, 1961). These critics assailed functionalism for its static bias, its overly deterministic and conformist notion of human behavior; the conservative political ideology that could be seen to underlie its intellectual substance; and its failure to satisfactorily address the presence of widespread and significant social conflict within society. As a result of such devastating attacks, the stronghold that functionalism had exerted on social science thinking was finally being loosened, and alternative—and very different—theoretical schemes could finally be considered. In this situation, it was only natural that "radical" branches or subfields of such disciplines as sociology, psychology, political science, and economics would begin to express ideas representing a variety of social conflict approaches to the study of social reality.

Following on the heels of these major developments in American intellectual thought were important social and political events that occurred during the 1960s and 1970s, which also helped to provide a conducive atmosphere for the refinement and application of social conflict principles. Campus revolt, the rejuvenation of the women's movement, increased concern about civil rights, the war on poverty, and the Vietnam War and its various domestic and international consequences provided the kind of atmosphere in which the theoretical ideas and ideological implications of conflict theory could be examined and adopted by many. As a result, during this period a number of critical works were published, many of which provided what were essentially "social conflict interpretations" of such substantive topics as the role and operation of government (e.g., Dornhoff, 1967); the treatment of racial minorities (e.g., Knowles & Prewitt, 1969); gender inequality (e.g., Reed, 1969); the workings of the criminal justice system (e.g., Quinney, 1970); and social stratification and poverty (e.g., Piven & Cloward, 1971) in American society. Similarly, but somewhat more generally, there soon appeared on the market a whole spate of "radical" social science texts with titles such as *Crisis in American Institutions* (Skolnick & Currie, 1970), *American*

*Society as a Social Problem* (Giner, 1973), and *Is America Possible?* (Etkowitz, 1974), in which the application of fundamental principles of a social conflict approach to the analysis of contemporary American society could be found.

Running through and uniting these analyses of American society and its way of life were fundamental and penetrating criticisms of American social institutions and core cultural values. What had generally been accepted and revered in the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s was now coming under heavy attack from America's minorities, youth, women, and intellectuals. The result was a time that was tumultuous and disruptive—both within academe (e.g., Roach, 1970) and beyond (Skolnick, 1969)—but very consistent with the basic principles of social conflict theory itself; this was also a time of change, challenge, and optimism about the possibilities of a better future.

### Social Conflict Theory and the Field of Family Studies

What was generally true of American social science during pre-1950s America was especially true of the field of "family studies" which began to develop during that period, as this is a discipline that proved to be especially resistant to the successful application of a social conflict approach. Indeed, well into the 1960s, the entire concept of conflict was generally missing from the mainstream work taking place within that field. Thus, for example, the 1963 editions of three of the most popular family textbooks of the decade (Cavan, Kirkpatrick; Winch) contained no index references whatsoever under the headings of "conflict," "social conflict," or "family conflict." Similarly, almost all of the handful of articles making specific reference to the concept of conflict published in the prestigious *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (titled *Marriage and Family Living* prior to 1964) deal with the phenomenon of intraindividual "role conflict," rather than truly social conflict between or otherwise involving various combinations of family members (e.g., Buerkle *et al.*, 1961; Podell, 1966; Scanzoni, 1965). Thus, Carlfred Broderick (1971) was probably not discriminating unfairly against this approach and its adherents when he dismissed the substance and potential of a social conflict perspective on the family in several short paragraphs

in his summary of the major developments in the field of family theory during the decade of the 1960s.

There are probably several key reasons why this situation occurred within the field of family studies, not the least of which is the fact that the earliest "scientific" attempts to research and understand the family were generally carried out within the context of the equilibrium-based, male-dominated, politically conservative, structural-functional interpretation of social reality about which we have already spoken. As Collins (1975) described this state of affairs:

The family has always been regarded through a murk of sentimentality. . . . The sociology of family . . . has been the bastion of functionalism, framing its analysis against an ideal system in which men, women, and children all fit nicely in their places. (p. 225)

Within this "idealized picture of the family" (Steinmetz & Straus, 1974a, p. 6), with its heavy emphasis on such "normal" family qualities as consensus, harmony, and stability, it was extremely difficult to take seriously the possibility that conflict is an integral part of family life. Thus to the extent that conflict was dealt with at all by family scholars working within this tradition, it was generally given a highly negative connotation and was seen as having disruptive consequences for the supposedly normal state of family "equilibrium." Indeed, such a conception of conflict carried with it an implicit value judgment that more than a certain amount of conflict is unusual and undesirable. "Healthy" and "normal" families might have their occasional intrafamily squabbles and disagreements to be sure, but only families that are "abnormal" in some way would be characterized by conflict as a basic, ongoing family process.

From a practical perspective, such a view of family conflict as a form of family "deviance" or "abnormality" naturally led to attempts to determine ways to eliminate, or at least control, its existence and manifestation. Blood's (1960) early treatment of family conflict is representative of this general perspective, as he stated:

No society can afford to turn its back on family conflict. The family is too indispensable a unit of social structure and too necessary a means for the transmission of culture to the oncoming generation to be allowed to fall apart. (p. 211)

### CHAPTER 15 • SOCIAL CONFLICT THEORIES

Nor was there any systematic treatment, in social conflict terms, of the possible relationship(s) between what takes place inside families and the social environment provided by the larger society. To the contrary, relationships between and trans-actions involving the family and society more generally were almost always framed in functional, mutually reciprocal terms (e.g., Bell & Vogel, 1960; Parsons & Bales, 1955; Winch, 1952). To the extent that all was not seen as being orderly and "functional" at the macrosocial level, these imperfections were generally portrayed as "strains," "anomie," or "social disorganization" (e.g., Goode, 1963; Ogburn, 1938; Vincent 1966) rather than as "social conflict" per se.

An additional obstacle faced by the social conflict approach to the study of the family is that it began to emerge at exactly that time that the discipline of family studies, like most other fields of social science, was moving dramatically and almost unidirectionally in a very positivistic, quantitative, "scientific" direction. Social conflict theory, in contrast, has frequently tended to take the form of broad, macrolevel "grand theory" (Mills, 1959, pp. 25-49), which does not ideally lend itself to axiomatic theory construction, rigid operationalization, and systematic empirical test. Indeed, many of the greatest and most important social conflict theorists (e.g., Marx, Engels, Freud, Weber, Simmel, Coser, Dahrendorf) have not been particularly inclined toward the need for the empirical verification of their ideas—or toward "scientific" activity generally, for that matter. To the contrary, social conflict theory, as formulated and used by many of its germinal founders, has tended to be an historical, humanistic, critical orientation to the social world.

In addition to such purely intellectual obstacles, there were also other factors that conspired to impede the development of a social conflict perspective on the family. One of these, of course, is the fact that scholarly activity necessarily takes place within the context of the larger cultural and social atmosphere of society. This was undoubtedly of particular importance in this instance, since there can be no denying that American society has tended to view the family as one of its most important social institutions, to be protected and defended whenever necessary. That the social conflict perspective would seek to challenge the core assumptions and values surrounding this near-sac-

red institution was nothing less than blasphemy in the eyes of many.

### The Emergence of a Social Conflict Theory of the Family

Despite the cumulative effect of all of these obstacles on its development and acceptance within the field of family studies, a social conflict approach to the study of the family did eventually emerge. While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact point at which this occurred, we would argue that a reasonable "date of birth" is the publication of an article entitled, "The Family as a System in Conflict," by Jetse Sprey (1969). This article was important both substantively, because of what it had to say about the nature of the family, and strategically-politically, because it was written by a family scholar very much within the mainstream field of family studies and appeared in what was at the time, *the social science journal* dealing with the family (the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*).

In his article, Sprey contended that:

Family sociologists have thus far failed to explain the causes of family conflict. This is not to say that conflict has been ignored far from it. . . . There seems some agreement on the proposition that a certain degree of conflict may actually help reinforce solidarity, and in the maintenance of a functional division of labor, and generally alleviate the boredom of too much marital consensus. It should, however, lead to happy reconciliations and not be too severe in nature, otherwise it is seen to result in the dissolution of the family or other unfortunate consequences (1969, p. 700)

As an alternative to this viewpoint, Sprey suggested the need for "a conflict framework," which focused explicitly on the family as "a system in conflict." Although Sprey did not go on to systematically lay out all of the basic components of this framework, he at least identified some of the basic assumptions on which it would rest and some of the fundamental issues with which it should deal. For example, he argued that within such a theoretical perspective:

. . . [family harmony must be considered a problematic rather than a normal state of affairs. A major theoretical question in the explanation of the family process . . . becomes: how is orderly cooperation

between family members possible? This instead of the conventional query: why conflict? (1969, p. 703) And he went on to add:

The family process is not concerned with the abolition of existing differences but with their effective management. Consequently, one major concern of many family sociologists: the description of areas of substantive agreement and disagreement assumes a different analytical perspective in the study of family behavior. In a conflict framework the focus is no longer the properties of the differences per se, but rather the ability of the family members to deal with the latter, regardless of content and magnitude. All possible areas of difference or agreement thus become properties of a situation to be confronted and are theoretically relevant only to the extent that they influence the process of cooperation. (pp. 703-704)

Although he may have been the first, Sprey was certainly not the only family scholar to actively mount a challenge to the "myth of family consensus and harmony" (Steinmetz & Straus, 1974a) that had prevailed to this point. In fact, that his article was really only the first wave of a much greater tide is revealed by a number of occurrences that followed shortly thereafter. For example, in 1971, the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* published special issues on the topics of "Sexism in Family Studies" (edited by Pauline Bart) and "Violence in the Family" (edited by Felix Berardo), in which many of the articles clearly demonstrated the analysis of important family-related issues from the perspective of a social conflict perspective. In fact, throughout the decade of the 1970s, there appeared in this journal [and in the other major periodical published by the National Council of Family Relations, *The Family Coordinator* (since renamed *Family Relations*)] a number of articles dealing with various elements of "family conflict," broadly defined. These included such substantive topics as husband-wife conflict (Bean & Kerckhoff, 1971; Gluck & Gross, 1975; Jorgensen, 1977); intrafamily communication patterns (Gilbert, 1976); conflict between parents and children (Blood & D'Angelo, 1974; Edwards & Brauburger, 1973); relationships between siblings (Hinger, 1975); family disputes over inheritance (Titus *et al.*, 1979); the distribution of power within families (Gallespie, 1971); intrafamily conflict management (Sprey, 1971); marital therapy and counseling (O'Connor, 1975; Weiss *et al.*, 1974); the parts played by force and the threat of force in family life (Goode, 1971);

marital rape (Gelles, 1977); the likely long-term consequences of using violence as a way of resolving intrafamily conflicts (Steinmetz, 1977); the relationship(s) between physical and verbal aggression in the family (Straus, 1974); and the structural barriers routinely faced by women in higher education (Bart, 1971).<sup>2</sup>

Also during the 1970s, a number of well-received family textbooks began to devote significant attention to the conflict approach to the study of the family. For example, Arlene Skolnick's (1973) revolutionary text, *The Intimate Environment: Exploring Marriage and the Family*, focused explicitly on a variety of forms of conflict in the family setting. *Men, Women, and Change*, written by Letha and John Scanzoni (1976), although promoting a social exchange orientation, specifically discussed the social conflict approach to the family and applied social conflict principles to a variety of specific substantive issues. Similarly, the second edition of Ross Eshleman's (1978) textbook, *The Family*, was revised and expanded to systematically discuss five (rather than the original four) basic conceptual frameworks to the study of the family, with the addition being a relatively thorough treatment of the social conflict approach.

Other books and monographs utilizing—either explicitly or implicitly—the basic principles of a conflict approach became more frequent as well. For example, David Cooper's (1970) book, *The Death of the Family*, used a psychoanalytic approach to discuss the inherent irrationality that he saw as being institutionalized within the basic structure of the contemporary family. John Scanzoni's (1972) *Sexual Bargaining: Power Politics in the American Marriage* contained a lengthy chapter devoted to "Marital Conflict as a Positive Force." Randall Collins' (1975) book, *Conflict Sociology: Toward An Explanatory Science*, discussed in depth the extent to which the family is characterized by coercive stratification systems based on gender and age. Ralph Larossa's (1977) *Conflict and Power in Marriage: Exploring the First Child* looked both at the phenomenology of

<sup>2</sup>Readers should note that we are not contending that all of these articles were necessarily written from an explicitly social conflict theory perspective (although many of them were). What we are attempting to point out, however, is that all of these works focused in various ways, on conflict as a basic aspect of family life—something that simply had not been the case in the previous decade.

marital conflict and the politics of the marital system more generally in couples experiencing their first pregnancy. Several edited collections dealing with the newly "discovered" phenomenon of family violence compiled by Murray Straus and his associates (Steinmetz & Straus, 1974b; Straus & Hotaling, 1980) contained a number of individual articles making explicit use of a social conflict perspective. And, in Volume 2 of the classic 1970s collection, *Contemporary Theories About the Family* (Burr *et al.*, 1979b), the social conflict approach was one of only five "general theories or theoretical orientations" to which an entire chapter-length discussion was devoted (Sprey, 1979).<sup>3</sup>

More systematic evidence of the increased use of the social conflict framework during the early to mid-1970s was provided by William Hays (1977), who found that, in a random sample of the members of the Marriage and Family section of the American Sociological Association conducted in 1975, 9% of the respondents claimed that they emphasized conflict theory as an approach in their teaching while 14% said that they emphasized conflict theory as an approach in their research. That this represented a recent growth in the popularity of this perspective was suggested by the fact that less than 1% of these respondents claimed that they had had an emphasis in conflict theory in their own training.

It should be noted that all of the above were developments taking place within what might be called the "mainstream" [or what Berg (1987) has termed the "mainstream"] of the field of family studies.<sup>4</sup> It is clearly the case that within the field

<sup>3</sup>The other theoretical perspectives so treated were choice and exchange theory, symbolic interactionism, general systems theory, and phenomenological sociology.

<sup>4</sup>This statement reflects our sense that feminist scholarship developed primarily outside and largely independent of the "family studies establishment." This is the only way that we can make sense of the relative absence of feminist thinkers and feminist analyses from the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*—even after the "ice had been broken" in 1971—as well as the sparse attention to and treatment of feminist thinkers and issues in the NCFR coordinated *Contemporary Theories of the Family* collections edited by Wesley Burr *et al.* (1979a,b). This is not necessarily to suggest that feminist scholars were consciously or intentionally discriminated against or excluded from these mainstream organizations and publications, but it is to point out that their ideas were largely developed and disseminated elsewhere.

of feminist scholarship, which had itself been experiencing an explosive period of growth and activity since the early 1960s, the basic principles of social conflict theory were being used to analyze gender relations generally, and the part(s) played by the family in maintaining inequalities in specific male-female relationships. Thus, for example, such feminist classics as Shulamith Firestone's (1970) *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, Alice Rossi's (1970) *Essays on Sex Equality*, Kate Miller's (1970) *Sexual Politics*, Juliet Mitchell's (1971) *Women's Estate*, and Vivian Gornick and Barbara Moran's (1971) *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness* (among many, many others) reflected what can be legitimately viewed as important variations on a social conflict theory of the family from a distinctively woman's perspective. Of equal importance, the early- to mid-1970s saw the beginnings of such journals as *Feminist Studies* (the first volume of which was published in 1973), *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* (first published in 1973), and *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (which appeared in 1975), thus providing feminist scholars with their first quasi-legitimate academic venues for the publication of their work, much of which represented a distinct brand of conflict theory.

Thus, in what could almost be termed a cathartic release of pent-up frustration and energy, an intellectual social movement was taking place within the field of family studies as it entered the 1970s. As part of this movement, numerous commentators on the family—both within and outside of traditional academia—were working together toward what Skolnick and Skolnick (1974, p. 16) had termed "the demystification of family life." A central theme of this demystification process was a fundamental questioning of the necessity, the validity, and the desirability of the continued adherence to the consensus-based, functionalist assumptions about the family as a well-integrated, harmonious, and mutually fulfilling social unit. Indeed, in dramatic contrast to this viewpoint, students of the family were beginning to realistically entertain the possibility that the family, both as a social group and a social institution, might well have unique structural characteristics that serve to increase the frequency, the "normality," and the intensity of conflict as a fundamental part of family reality.

In addition to its sheer intellectual substance,

however, there can be no denying that social conflict theory was an approach to the study of the family that "naturally" held considerable ideological and personal appeal for the new generation of family scholars that was emerging at this time (i.e., those currently in graduate school or those who had recently been hired for their first university position), many of whom were seasoned veterans of political demonstrations, sexual liberation, civil rights protests, and perhaps even the Vietnam War. Indeed, these were individuals who had themselves experienced the questioning of anger against, and alienation from the larger society and who were now challenging, in a variety of ways, the core values and hegemonic power structure of white, male-dominated, middle-class, corporate America. In social conflict theory, these young family scholars found a theoretical and ideological perspective that served both to reinforce their own "radical" constructions of reality and to band them together in a kind of "class consciousness" with like-minded peers.

Last, but certainly not least, is the fact that social conflict theory, when applied to the family, could easily be interpreted as saying something very real and very compelling about fundamental family issues that many family scholars and practitioners had been concerned about—and had perhaps themselves experienced—on a very personal level. Clearly, the conflict perspective seemed to explicitly acknowledge the widespread prevalence and potentially devastating effects of such "family problems" as unequal opportunities for women (both within and outside of their own family units); the living conditions and personal frustrations routinely faced by those raised in families disadvantaged by their racial/ethnic and/or socioeconomic statuses; and the experiencing of any of a variety of forms of physical and emotional abuse at the hands of one's husband, father, or loved one in a way that the functionalist paradigm had been unable (or disinclined) to do. The fact that this new, more "sympathetic" perspective seemed to lead to the redefinition of such "personal troubles" as "public issues" (Mills, 1959, pp. 8-13) obviously gave it great ideological appeal to those whose interest in these problems was personal as well as intellectual.

Thus, while it is understandable why it took so long for a viable social conflict perspective to develop within the field of family studies, there is little reason to wonder why it emerged when it

finally did. And, with its development, came the application of a "new" set of concepts and assumptions to the analysis of family reality.<sup>5</sup> Let us now turn our attention to the distinctive view of the family which this set of concepts and assumptions produced.

### A Social Conflict Perspective on the Family

The social conflict perspective on the family<sup>6</sup> can be seen to begin with a fundamental assumption of conflict theory more generally: that social conflict is a basic element of human social life. Conflict exists everywhere, within all types of social interaction, and at all levels of social organization. This is as true of the family as it is of any other type of social entity.

According to most social conflict theorists, the basic reason for the prevalence of conflict, both within and outside of families, is the fact that individual actors (and the groups that these actors form) are generally motivated to act in accordance with their own individual interests; that is, the needs, values, goals, and resources that, for any of a variety of reasons, they define as important, desirable, or advantageous and thus pursue in their day-to-day dealings with one another. According to the social conflict theorist, then, it cannot be assumed that individuals and groups are all identical in terms of what they think, desire, and seek; neither can it be assumed that individual actors will "naturally" be motivated to act in a

<sup>5</sup>Of course, it is true that many of the concepts utilized by family conflict theory are common to and shared by other theoretical perspectives; to the extent that this is true, these concepts are obviously not new in any literal sense. What makes them so, in the context of the present discussion, is when they are combined together to form a unique and distinctive worldview of the subject matter under consideration.

<sup>6</sup>Once again, limitations of space prevent us from doing much more than presenting a brief but generic account of our sense of the most basic principles of and emphases within the family conflict approach to date. Those who are interested in examining the development of this perspective in greater depth are encouraged to consult such sources as the following: Coer (1996); Sprey (1969, 1971, 1979); Scanzoni (1972); Collins (1975); Farrington and Foss (1977); Larossa (1977); Straus (1979); Foss (1980); and Hartmann (1981). Also useful is Montgomery's (1990) recent review of family conflict processes.

manner consistent with what would appear to be the best interests of the larger social order. Instead, the conflict theorist begins with a view of the human actor as separate and distinct from that social order, in the sense that he/she has, in any particular social situation or relationship, a relatively clear (although not necessarily rational or objectively accurate) individual idea of what it is that he/she wants.

More specifically, the social conflict theorist sees two basic possibilities within the social world whereby individuals and groups can be brought into conflict, and these apply as readily to the family as to any other social context. One of these is that different individuals and groups may want different things. In such situations, the actors involved have goals, values, interests, and agendas that are basically dissimilar and perhaps even contradictory. This kind of conflict situation is clearly endemic to family systems. Parents may want to read the Sunday newspaper while their children want attention. One child may want to watch cartoons on television while his sibling wants to play video games. A husband may want more time to enjoy the local golf course on weekends while his wife wants more equal participation in household tasks. In each of these situations, the source of conflict can be conceptualized as individual interests that clash with one another, sometimes to the point of incompatibility.

A second possible kind of conflict occurs in those situations in which different individuals or groups want the same things, but there is only a limited supply of these desired commodities available for distribution. In such situations the individuals or groups in question can be seen to have similar, not different, goals and interests; however, just as Malthus and Darwin suggested the existence of a chronic struggle among the members of the human species for the basic components of subsistence, so, too, can this kind of reasoning be used to explain the competition that frequently exists within families over such important-but-limited resources as love, attention, power, or money.

Looking at this notion of "self-interest" a bit more deeply, it is important to realize that different persuasions of conflict theory will tend to see this characteristic of the human actor as stemming from very different sources. For Freud, or Simmel, or any of a number of more contemporary ethnologists and sociobiologists (e.g., Ardrey, 1961;

Lorenz, 1966; van den Berghe, 1975), the individual motivations underlying conflict in humans can be seen to be at least partially the product of internal "instinctual" forces, "naturally" possessed by all members of (or certain subtypes within) the human species, as a basic part of the human condition. On the other hand, for a more structurally minded sociologist like Marx, Engels, or Weber, such self-interests can be seen to stem from the social statuses that various individuals occupy in the larger social structure, and/or from the cultural or subcultural values to which they have been exposed during their socialization experiences. Whatever their specific origin, however, the conflict theorist sees these individual (and group) interests as being of primary importance in understanding social interaction and social relationships.

Idealistic preconceptions and romanticization of family life aside, there is no reason to expect the family to be somehow exempt from the operation and potential consequences of this chronic presence of multiple self-interest. In fact, many family theorists (e.g., Foss, 1980; Gelles & Straus, 1979; Hotaling and Straus, 1980) contend that there are a number of basic characteristics of families—stemming from the functions with which they are necessarily entrusted; their basic patterns of internal organization; and the quality and the quantity of the social interactions which prevail within—that serve to make them particularly susceptible to conflict and its effects.

This discussion of the centrality of the notion of individual self-interest to the family conflict theorist should not, however, be taken to suggest a completely atomistic, fragmented, and asocial state of human affairs, that is, a contemporary version of the Hobbesian notion of "the war of each against all." To the contrary, many of the "individual" interests that are of greatest importance to family scholars are socially shared and collectively pursued, by (1) those who occupy similar social status positions (for example, those who share socioeconomic, gender, and age statuses); (2) those who belong to the same social groups and organizations (for example, the same neighborhood, work organization, or family unit); and (3) those who have experienced similar socialization experiences, and thus had their "individual" interests formed and shaped in roughly equivalent ways. This notwithstanding, the point is that, in sharp contrast to a theoretical perspective like struc-

tural functionalism, it cannot be assumed (according to social conflict theory) that individuals in any social organization, even one as small and intimate as the family, will "naturally" share and work toward the same basic goals and values. This may, of course, be the condition that prevails within some families at some points in time; it is not, however, their "normal," "necessary," or "equilibrium" state.

To pursue the above theme of the inherently *social* nature of social conflict a bit further, one of the more powerful and sociologically satisfying versions of family conflict theory is explicitly macrostructural in nature. For example, those who would employ a Marxist (or neo-Marxist) approach to the study of the family (e.g., Chafetz, 1988b; Eisenstein, 1979; Hartmann, 1981; Zaretsky, 1976)<sup>7</sup> tend to emphasize such things as the contributions that the family makes to a capitalist economy, both as a source of labor and as a consumptive unit; the material conditions typically experienced by families and family members at different levels of the social class system; and the ways in which interpersonal, intrafamily relations are impacted (and distorted) by the capitalist infrastructure. As a result, theorists of this type are likely to be particularly interested in such structural variations of the contemporary family as Afro-American and Hispanic families; families in poverty; and single-parent, female-headed families, all of whom can be seen to experience disproportionately the kinds of deprived living conditions originally predicted by Marxist thinking. In addition, such theorists are also likely to focus on the various ways in which families *generally* are involved in the reproduction of the larger capitalist order, through such mechanisms as the socialization of children, the division of household labor, and the power structures that prevail within families.

Indeed, the notion of "power" is as central to many versions of family conflict theory as the notion of "conflict" itself. Thus, we find family conflict theorists describing family organization using such terms as "power system" (Goode, 1971).

<sup>7</sup>Marx, himself, did little actual writing on the family (Doan, 1974). However, the theoretical principles within his theory can be and have been easily generalized to the topic of the family (Rach & Rouch, 1975). This is seen not only in Engel's seminal work on the oppression of women by and within the family, but in more contemporary sources such as those cited here.

"political process" (Larossa, 1977), and "structure of dominance" (Collins, 1975), all of which suggest the basic assumption that family systems can be properly characterized as possessing significant power differentials, according to which some family members are considerably more able than others to pursue their particular self-interests.

Much of the power in families can be seen as "legitimate" power (Weber, 1968, pp. 31-38), meaning that it is embodied within and sanctioned by the social norms and cultural values of the larger society. From these macrosocial origins, such prescriptions about power are typically translated into the family-specific norms that govern individual family units, thus demonstrating once again the importance, for advocates of a social conflict perspective, of the relationships between (1) microlevel (i.e., intrafamily) and (2) macrolevel (i.e., structural and cultural) social phenomena.

In the context of the present discussion, one of the most important of these linking mechanisms are the systems of gender and age stratification that have characterized (either explicitly or implicitly) both (1) the family institutions of most human societies throughout history and (2) many of the individual family units that together make up these family institutions. In addition to distributing (and, conversely, withholding) valued resources in an unequal fashion, these systems of stratification serve to organize and systematize the interests of those family members who have power (males and middle-aged adults, most typically) and to provide a fundamental basis according to which these interests can be pursued, with fundamental normative support. As a result, just as it is possible to speak of such characteristics of society as racism, classism, and sexism (and the conditions of discrimination, exploitation, and oppression that typically accompany these invidious systems of social ranking), it is equally possible to speak of the systems of sexism and ageism that, in the eyes of most conflict theorists, prevail within modern family systems.

One result of this tendency toward stratification, both within families and within societies more generally, is the creation and perpetuation of a variety of "structural inequalities"; that is, basic mechanisms and processes that are built into the very structure of society and its component social systems, which result in the differential

treatment of individuals and groups by virtue of their relative positions in the stratification systems based on class, race, gender or age. Together, these structural inequalities can be seen to constitute differential opportunity structures, according to which certain family members or certain types of family members (i.e., women, children, and the aged, most typically) are systematically denied equal opportunity to pursue their individual and group interests.

From the standpoint of internal family dynamics, the phenomenon of power (or, more properly stated, the unequal distribution of power) can be seen to be important in several ways. First, such power differentials can themselves serve as a source of conflict within the family, as there may occur within individual family units concerted efforts to challenge and perhaps even overthrow existing power structures in a kind of microlevel counterpart to the Marxian notion of class conflict. Perhaps more typical within the family environment, however, is the presence of ongoing negotiations over and bargaining about those matters in which power is an issue. With this in mind, Szniovacz (1987) speaks of "power exertion processes" and "power resistance strategies" whereby individual family members attempt, respectively, to exercise their own power and resist the power exertions of others.

Second, intrafamily power distributions can be seen to be one of several structural mechanisms of *conflict management* or *conflict regulation* that operate within families to "keep within limits" or "suppress" (with the second of these terms meant somewhat more pejoratively than the first) those "latent" or potential conflicts of interest that have not yet generated or resulted in actual conflict-related behavior. Thus, as is true of any social relationship or organization that is characterized by a substantial power differential, those who have power (especially if they have a good deal of it vis-à-vis their interactional partners) will be able to "call the shots" and mandate "how things will be," often preventing in the process much in the way of dispute or dissension from those who disagree. In this way, the power structures that characterize many families can be seen to mask, hide, obscure, or otherwise suppress fundamental conflicts of interest that may exist, and to thus prevent or minimize the expression of actual conflict *behavior* by various family members. Norms about power and the specific extra-

and intrafamily roles that assign unequal amounts of power and authority to different family members are only some of the mechanisms of conflict regulation that exist within families. Indeed, some of the most important work to emanate from the family conflict perspective to date (e.g., Bell *et al.*, 1982; Chafetz, 1980; Sprey, 1971) has focused on the various ways in which family conflict is suppressed, managed, or regulated, and the likely correlates and consequences of these different strategies of conflict management.

By and large, most conflict theorists seem to agree that both the complete suppression and the complete avoidance of family conflict will ultimately prove to be problematic, either for the family system overall or for its individual members. At the same time, however, there is also widespread agreement that there may not be any true "solutions" to many intrafamily conflicts of interest, in the sense that the individual goals, interests, or values that are their source can be completely eliminated. For this reason, then, it becomes imperative for individual family systems to develop means of acknowledging and dealing with the conflicts that exist therein in ways that, although not perfect from the perspectives of all involved, are generally acceptable to the various participants.

Thus, although conflict will not be completely eliminated from the family system—indeed, this is a logical impossibility, according to most conflict theorists—it can be kept within manageable limits within which the family can continue to exist as a stable and mutually fulfilling entity. Cuber and Harroff's (1965) notion of "the conflict-habituated" marriage indicates how this can occur quite satisfactorily, even in what might seem to the external observer to be an extreme case, and this idea of conflict as a basic element of stable intimate relationships is easily generalized from the marital dyad *per se* to the family system more generally.

Relatedly, families are seen by many conflict theorists to be inherently ironic (Hotaling & Straus, 1980) and paradoxical (Foss, 1980), in that they contain both important structural mechanisms that operate to suppress or regulate the amount and specific manifestations of family conflict at the same time that they are also characterized by processes that operate to generate and intensify those very conflicts. In this sense, then, the family seems quite clearly to possess what we



referred to earlier as a "dualistic" quality, since it is characterized—perhaps inherently so—by tendencies toward both conflict, competition, and disagreement, and order, stability, and cooperation.

One of the most important points to be made is that the ongoing presence of social order, both within the family and within the social world more generally, is typically not denied by the social conflict theorist. Indeed, we think that it is accurate to claim that family conflict theory is as much about order and the processes by which that order is maintained as it is about conflict and the reasons for conflict, and the ways in which conflict is typically manifested in families. For this reason, it would be a fundamental misunderstanding of conflict theory to assume that its adherents (at least, the majority of them) view all families as chronically chaotic, problem-ridden, and on the brink of collapse. To the contrary, the family is much more typically seen as representing an "organizational process . . . [that] becomes a reciprocal peace-keeping effort, which . . . result[s] in a more or less stable, harmonious negotiated order" (Spry, 1980, p. 8).

However, it is equally important to emphasize once more that this social order is not assumed by social conflict theorists to be the natural or necessary state of the family. Rather, it is "created" and "maintained," through any of a variety of social processes and mechanisms operating both within and outside of the family, and subjected upon the family and its members. Depending on which particular brand of family conflict theory one subscribes to, this process may be one of manipulation and hegemony, in which a "ruler" or a "ruling class" attempts to structure and control life within the family so as to protect its position of power, and maintain its ability to pursue its self-interest. Or, it may be a process in which all family members, both those who have power and those who do not, participate, more or less equally, as a result of their shared vested interest in the continuation of the group and the group's ability to pursue their common goals and interests.

On a somewhat different note, there have been a number of contemporary family scholars who have drawn upon the earlier thinking of people like Simmel and Coser to argue that family conflict is actually functional in its consequences so long as it is limited in amount, intensity, and manner of expression. Thus, conflict has been argued to be

beneficial as a source of personal growth, as a way of bringing about beneficial change within the family unit (or, if carried out within a large number of families simultaneously, within the larger family institution); and as an effective way of addressing and dealing with underlying or potential family problems. There have even been some who have argued that such "extreme" ways of acting out or responding to conflict as various forms of verbal and physical aggression are in fact cathartic in their effects, in the sense that they provide a "safety valve" through which individuals engaged in conflict can release pent-up energies and frustrations, and purge these potentially cancerous elements from the family system.<sup>8</sup>

This is certainly not to suggest that most conflict theorists share a view that *all* of the various forms and manifestations of family conflict should be expected to provide such critical "latent functions" for family systems and their members. Indeed, common sense would suggest, and research has convincingly documented, that much of the family conflict that manifests itself behaviorally, through any of a variety of specific conflict tactics (Straus, 1979), is in fact harmful and destructive, either to entire family systems or to individual family members. Thus, the links between family conflict and such family "problems" as interpersonal violence and abuse, the maltreatment of children, and the termination of individual family units through divorce are both intuitively obvious and socially significant.

Much of what we have said thus far has been concerned with intrafamily conflict between family members, either as individuals acting in the capacity of individuals, or as individuals as incumbents of social status positions within larger social structures. In fact, our reading of the use of the social conflict perspective by family social scientists to date suggests that they have tended, by and large, to restrict their analyses to conflict as it characterizes and manifests itself within individual family units, involving various combinations of individual family members. While undoubtedly important, such applications of the social conflict approach are by no means exhaustive. Indeed, as

Many other family scholars and practitioners disagree strongly with this suggestion that large amounts and/or violent types of conflict are "good" for families, on both empirical and philosophical grounds. See, for example, Steinhilber and Straus (1974a) and Straus (1974).

argued in an earlier paper (Farrington & Foss, 1977), there are potentially useful applications of this perspective at other, less micro, levels of family reality; for example, (1) conflicts between family units, (2) conflicts between family units and other organizational or institutional entities, and (3) conflicts between the family institution and other macrolevel structures within society. This recommendation is guided by our conviction that such fundamental conflict concepts as "conflict of interest," "conflict behavior," "power," and "conflict regulation" can be seen to transcend individual family members, and individual family units, and to have genuine relevance to the analysis of relationships involving larger sociological entities.

In conclusion, then, the picture of family structure and family process that develops out of the application of social conflict theory to the study of the family is unique and distinctive. It sees family conflict as completely consistent with the nature of the individual actor, the nature of the family, and the nature of human social life more generally. It acknowledges that intrafamily conflict will, with some frequency, manifest itself within individual family units in any of a variety of intrapsychic, emotional states and specific conflict behaviors. In addition to conflict per se, it also focuses on the ways in which order is created and maintained within the family, either through (1) force, coercion, and constraint or (2) negotiation, bargaining, and compromise. And, finally, it alerts all of us to the possible discrepancies that may exist between our beliefs about and assumptions regarding families; that is, our family ideology, and the ways that families actually are "in real life."

### The Present Status and Likely Future of Family Conflict Theory

In a recent and comprehensive review of the field of family theory, Darwin Thomas and Jean Edmondson Wilcox (1987) suggested that the overall influence of social conflict theory on the field of family studies has already peaked, and that it has actually been on the wane for quite some time now. If one accepts this premise as accurate, which we are inclined to do, our final task in this chapter becomes one of determining the precise causes and consequences of this relatively short

life span of the family conflict approach. More specifically, we need to know (1) what exactly has happened to hinder or prevent the full and lasting development of this theoretical approach; (2) what the consequences of this rapid demise of the family conflict approach have been for such family-related professional activities as theorization and research, teaching about the family, and family counseling and therapy; and (3) whether the "patient" has any chance for survival and resuscitation, or whether its "death" will indeed be final and irreversible.

A preliminary answer to the first of these questions may well lie in the fact that, even in its finest heyday, the conflict approach was actually employed by a relatively small minority of those who call themselves family theorists and researchers. Moreover, it seems almost certain that a fair number of those who defined themselves as "family conflict scholars," for example, many of those writing from an explicitly feminist perspective, were on the fringes of and thus had relatively limited impact on what has traditionally been a rather conservative, male-dominated, protectionist field of family studies. In fact, several pieces of empirical research carried out by David Klein and his associates, looking specifically at actual patterns of usage of the social conflict framework during what was presumably its period of greatest popularity, appear to lend support to this thesis.

For example, in their self-report study carried out in the mid-1970s, Klein, Schvaneveldt, and Miller (1977) failed to find the social conflict approach among those family theories (1) most identified with, (2) most frequently used, or (3) having the greatest impact on students, as reported by a national sample of contemporary family theorists.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in his systematic analysis of

<sup>9</sup>Those readers familiar with this study might object that the researchers did not even include the social conflict perspective as one of the choices on the questionnaire that asked respondents about their theoretical attitudes and inclinations, thereby minimizing the possibility that this school of thought would in fact be cited. We would counter by suggesting that this omission (in addition to itself saying something significant about the way in which the conflict perspective was viewed at the time that this study was carried out) was not, in and of itself, a determining factor in the lack of support given for the conflict approach. Indeed, two other perspectives similarly not mentioned by name in the researchers' survey instrument (general systems theory and the social exchange perspective) were written in with sufficient frequency to be in-

all of the papers presented at the Theory, Construction and Methodology Workshops at the annual meetings of the National Council on Family Relations between the years 1971 and 1979—a collection of papers that should, arguably, have constituted the true cutting edge in family theory during that period—Klein (1979, p. 12) found that a total of four papers (out of 125 overall) had been concerned with the development or application of the social conflict perspective. This represents only 2.4% of the total papers delivered at these workshops and less than 7% of those papers dealing specifically with some aspect of "family theory."

On the basis of data like these, it seems reasonable to suggest that, while conflict principles were certainly being introduced to and adopted within the field of family studies during the 1970s, it was clearly not the case that a major "paradigm shift" was occurring within the discipline as a whole. Instead, social conflict theory remained "a minor theoretical approach" (Holman & Burr, 1980), even during the period of its greatest popularity and utilization.

The obstacles faced by a social conflict theory of the family have not been restricted to difficulty in gaining adherents within "the family establishment" however; there have also been substantive problems within this perspective that have conspired to weaken its influence and diminish its overall utility. To our way of thinking, the most significant of these has been the overall lack of intellectual coherence among the various "schools" or "types" of family conflict theory that have made their appearance during the past quarter-century. Indeed, it is not possible, in our view, to identify a single social conflict theory of the family, in the same sense that it is possible to speak of a single structural-functionalist perspective, or a single symbolic interactionist perspective, or a single social exchange theory. In fact, we elected to title this a chapter on "Social Conflict Theories of the Family" to make explicit our view that the social conflict approach to the study of the family of which we are speaking is best seen as a curious amalgam, consisting of a number of rather unlikely bedfellows, including traditional Marxist thought, structural-functionalism, feminist theory, Weberian sociology, psychoanalytic theory, communica-

tioned among the seven most popular perspectives. The social conflict approach, on the other hand, was not

tion theory, phenomenological sociology, and sociobiology. Moreover, when all is said and done, these diverse theoretical roots may have been a mixed blessing for the family conflict perspective that developed during the past two decades, since they have allowed (and perhaps even encouraged) the combining of a number of different—and, at times, highly dissimilar—ideas under the single, general rubric of "family conflict theory."

One of the factors that most facilitated this rather indiscriminate lumping together of diverse social conflict theories was the particular historical circumstances under which the family conflict perspective emerged; that is, it came about primarily as a reaction *against* something (with that something being both the theoretical substance and the implicit ideology of the structural-functionalist perspective), as opposed to a theoretical program independently developed and consciously crafted to stand on its own intellectual feet. Moreover, it was a reaction that was at best incomplete, since, as Ritzer has convincingly argued, many of the conflict theories that developed during the 1960s and 1970s were actually nothing more than inverted mirror images of the functionalist ideas with which they disagreed; as such, they remained firmly (although perhaps unwittingly) rooted within the same basic paradigm of social reality (Ritzer, 1975, 1988, pp. 227-241).

To be sure, the diverse strains of conflict thinking that were applied to the study of the family shared one basic assumption: that the phenomenon of "social conflict" is absolutely central and of critical importance to an understanding of human social existence, both within and outside of the family. But when it came to questions such as how conflict should be defined, or what its precise causes are, or how it will manifest itself in the family setting, or what its specific consequences will be for family systems and their members, general consensus was not to be found (nor was it even sought, for the most part).

The result of these historical circumstances has been the development of a rather eclectic *conceptual framework* (Hill & Hansen, 1960; Klein, 1980; Nye & Berardo, 1966, pp. 1-9), which is centered around the assumption that this thing called "conflict," broadly defined, is a basic, common, natural, recurring fact of family reality. However, for the reasons noted above, this framework is not really rooted within nor does it neces-

sarily lead to a single social conflict theory of the family. Instead, it subsumes a number of different (but not always or necessarily complementary) social theories about family conflict.

In and of itself, this is not a bad thing, and it has not prevented this social conflict perspective from generating a good deal of important and, in all likelihood, otherwise unobtainable information about families and the ways that families work. Indeed, in our view, it would be a serious misreading of the situation to suggest that the family conflict "theory" that has emerged out of the development and application of these diverse approaches and ideas has somehow been wasted on or harmful to the field of family studies. To the contrary, it has served to push the study of the family in important directions, by introducing a new arsenal of concepts and assumptions, raising for critical consideration a whole arena of important family-related topics, and providing what is (or, at least, was) a fresh and exciting way of approaching the study of family reality.

In fact, it seems to us that the critical part that the social conflict perspective has played in advancing both (1) the state of our knowledge about the family and (2) our sense of the specific things that we should be looking at as we attempt to gain this knowledge can be described quite appropriately using one of the central concepts of Marxian conflict theory—the dialectic. According to this conception, the conflict approach to the study of the family served by a powerful antithesis to the thesis provided by the dominant school of thought in the late 1960s and early 1970s—the functionalist-equilibrium model of social order.

For this metaphor to be complete, however, we should go further, and inquire into the nature of the synthesis that has developed out of this dialectical process. And, when we look at important theoretical developments that have occurred within the field of family theory in recent years, we see several emerging theoretical perspectives that seem to be firmly grounded within family conflict theory and its reaction to its structural-functionalist predecessor.<sup>10</sup>

One of these theoretical approaches is *critical theory* (e.g., Morgan, 1975; Osmond, 1987; <sup>10</sup>Of course, an equally viable interpretation of the development of these two fields vis-à-vis family conflict theory is that they mark a simple, linear extension and outgrowth of the conflict approach, rather than the product of a truly dialectical process.

Paolucci & Bubolz, 1980; Poster, 1978), which, although based on Marxist and neo-Marxist principles, nonetheless rejects many of the epistemological, methodological, and substantive assumptions underlying what we have described in this chapter as "family conflict theory." Similarly, *feminist theory* (e.g., Andersen, 1988, pp. 287-358; Chafetz, 1988a; Komarovsky, 1988; Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 1988), at least in many of its most important forms, employs many of the concepts and assumptions of social conflict theory in its analysis of male-female relations; and the place of women in the family and in society more generally; however, it seems neither substantively accurate nor ideologically appropriate to categorize feminist theory as nothing more than a subtype of or variation on the conflict perspective (Stacey & Thorne, 1985, p. 308).

In both of these "emerging" theoretical perspectives, we find a sharpness, a depth, and a critical focus that, somewhat ironically, perhaps, has often been lacking within much of "traditional" family conflict theory. For example, we see in both critical theory, and most versions of feminist theory, a movement away from reliance on and faith in traditional, positivistic, "scientific" methods, and a movement toward less restrictive and less "normative" ways of gaining knowledge about the social world. In addition, we see a greater emphasis on the subjective, interpretive processes by which family reality is constructed, at both the individual and sociocultural levels of social reality, in contrast to a preoccupation with the objective, materialist conditions that prevail over and within the family. Moreover, we see a clearer focus on and more serious consideration of the larger "contextual" conditions—structural, cultural, and historical—within which family life takes place. And, finally, we see a greater emphasis on the responsibility of those who study the family to help change the status quo, by emancipating individuals from the various forms of oppression, exploitation, and dehumanization that persist in modern societies and in families.

The family conflict perspective could have been all of these things; indeed, to some of those who have been its adherents during the past 20 years, the traits outlined in the previous paragraph might seem to represent an accurate description of what they believe the family conflict approach to have been all about. However, where the conflict approach seems to us to have fallen short,

particularly when compared to the critical and feminist theoretical approaches, is that it is less focused in scope, unified in purpose, and coherent in substance. To be sure, the social conflict perspective had "the right idea"; however, it failed to take that idea far enough, either in terms of developing a clear, integrated, internally consistent conception of social reality, or in formulating a specific plan of action as to how best to gain insight into the nature of that social reality.

And, the final frosting on the cake, perhaps, is that both the critical and feminist approaches seem to possess something else that more traditional conflict theory does not: the kind of ideological passion that, we argued earlier, helped to bring about the emergence of the family conflict perspective in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but which has gradually died out as we have progressed through the 1980s, and family conflict theory has taken its place within the repertoire of "mainstream" family theories (Sprey, 1988). Now, in an eerie kind of *déjà vu*, the ideological appeal that they clearly have for constituents with important personal commitments to critical and feminist perspectives (i.e., women, and the many others who perceive themselves to be oppressed by and alienated from the world(s) in which they live) is serving as much to spearhead the rapid development and infusion of these two schools of thought as is their intellectual substance per se.

What must not be forgotten in all of this, however, is the fact that many of the most important roots of critical and feminist theory lie firmly within the basic principles of the social conflict approach that we have described in this chapter. For this reason, we have little doubt that whatever happens to family conflict theory in the future, many of the basic concepts, assumptions, and agenda that led to its formation 20 years ago will continue to live on, albeit in modified form, as part of these more recent (and more powerful) theoretical perspectives. In this sense, then, the legacy of social conflict theory to the field of family studies seems assured.

However, it is also our sense that, to paraphrase Mark Twain, "the reports of the death of the social conflict framework have been greatly exaggerated." After all, 7 of the 30 articles that appeared in Marvin Sussman's and Suzanne Steinmetz's 1987 volume, *Handbook of Marriage and the Family* (Langman, Marchiano, Osmond, Settles, Steinmetz, Szinovacz, Thomas & Wilcox), made

explicit reference to the "social conflict theory" of the family, and several of these chapters linked this perspective to such important substantive topics as family power, intrafamily violence, and the relationship(s) between social stratification and the family. Somewhat similarly, the past five years have seen important articles published in such family-related periodicals as *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *Journal of Family Issues*, *Family Relations*, and *Journal of Marriage and Family Therapy* (among others) on such topics as the relationships between the economic institution, gender stratification, and the family (Blumberg, 1988)<sup>11</sup>; the relationships between coerciveness, control, and consensus in marital decision making (Godwin & Scanzoni, 1989); the normative structures that husbands and wives create to regulate marital conflicts (Jones & Galois, 1989); the mechanisms by which families manage casual verbal conflicts (Vuchitch, 1987); divorce settlements and parental conflict (Bay and Braver, 1990); conflicts between wives and their mothers-in-law (Marotz-Baden & Cowan, 1987); parents' attempts to control the sexual attitudes and behaviors of their adolescent children (Miller *et al.*, 1986); conflicts between parents and children more generally (Hall, 1987); marital and parent-child conflict in households in which adult children live with their elderly parents (Suttor & Pillemer, 1987, 1988); the relative abilities of different kinds of families to resolve conflicts in ways not involving physical and verbal aggressiveness (Martin *et al.*, 1987); the nature of the relationship between conflict and marital violence (Gullette, 1987); the possible impacts of alcohol abuse on marital conflict and family dynamics more generally (O'Farrell & Birchler, 1987); techniques of conflict resolution used in premarital, intimate relationships (Billingham, 1987; Lloyd, 1987); and marital conflict in dual-career families (Galambos & Silberstein, 1989). Finally, a paper by Sprey (1990), "revisiting" the family conflict perspective that he helped create, was the subject of a special session at recent meetings of the National Council on Family Relations. Thus, the investigation of the topic of family conflict—often employing what we have described in this chapter

as a "family conflict theory" approach—continues, regardless of how commentators may have assessed the overall prominence and significance of this approach through the years.

However, the scientific activities of theorization about and research on the family may not represent the greatest value or impact of the family conflict perspective as the field of family studies enters the 1990s. Indeed, it seems highly significant to us that virtually all of the 15 "popular family textbooks" reviewed in the February 1987 volume of *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (Pollis *et al.*, 1987) contain fairly extensive discussions of the topic of conflict within or otherwise involving family units, and six of these<sup>12</sup> (Collins, 1986; Eshleman, 1985; Kammeyer, 1987; Lamanna & Riedmann, 1985; Leslie & Korman, 1985; Skolnick, 1987) make explicit reference to something called social conflict theory or a social conflict conceptual framework as an important approach to the study of the family. This obviously stands in dramatic contrast to the textbook treatment of social conflict in the mid-1960s noted earlier, and suggests to us that those involved in teaching family-related courses to undergraduate students may still find family conflict theory to be an especially useful pedagogical device for conveying important principles about the family, even if professional interest in this approach has declined somewhat at the levels of theory construction and verification.

Somewhat similarly, while we would be the first to point out that we are not family therapists or counselors, and that we cannot begin to claim expertise in the extensive and sophisticated literature of that field, one thing that we do know about this area of family activity is that there have been a number of provocative articles and books written by counselors and therapists (e.g., Bach & Wyden, 1968; Charney, 1972; Hine, 1980) in recent years that have essentially argued for the inevitability of intrafamily conflict, and the resulting necessity of developing techniques for the management of this conflict, in effect, of learning how to fight "fairly" and constructively. With this in mind, we were frankly somewhat surprised by the virtual absence of anything called (or even resem-

bling) "family conflict theory" in the several comprehensive reviews of the marital and family counseling field that have been written in the past decade (Kaslow, 1987; Olson *et al.*, 1980; Piercy and Sprengle, 1990).

On the one hand, we realize that this lack of mention of a social conflict theory within the fields of family and marital therapy is consistent with and may well be a reflection of our earlier hypothesis regarding the general demise of the social conflict approach within the field of family studies. However, we still cannot rid ourselves of our intuition that, when all is said and done, family counselors, therapists, and clinicians cannot help but apply many of the basic principles of a social conflict approach to the family in their efforts to "cure" or "treat" troubled marital and family systems. Indeed, what is marital and family therapy if it is not a rationalized, structured, and (in many instances) highly powerful form of conflict management, attempting to determine the causes of, manipulate the consequences of, and keep within limits the conflicts that necessarily occur in human family life?

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<sup>11</sup>As noted, this citation actually refers to the introductory article written by the editor of a special *Journal of Family Issues* volume, dealing with the general topic specified in its title.

<sup>12</sup>This figure increases to seven if one substitutes the more recent edition of the text by Strong and DeVault (1989) for the volume reviewed by Pohn and her associates (Strong *et al.*, 1983).

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## Queer Families Quack Back

JUDITH STACEY AND ELIZABETH DAVENPORT

That's what I like.... How we as queers get to choose our families. It's like picking the right color scheme for your house. We don't have to accept what the state has given us. We accessorize. — ('George', in Mann, 1999)

The buzz around this year's Millennium March on Washington doesn't tout glitter or pageantry. It boasts the addition of a 'family area' with activities for the kids; it tells you where to rent a baby stroller. (Hank Stuever, 2000)

'If it looks like a duck, and it walks like a duck, and it quacks like a duck, then it *is* a duck!' Thus ran the verdict pronounced by opponents of the historic legislation by which Vermont became the first state in the USA to grant lesbian and gay couples the right to form civil unions. Debating the bill's provisions in March 2000, hostile lawmakers complained that a civil union was nothing less than marriage by another name, while a flock of little yellow plastic ducks brooded disconsolately on desks throughout the chamber.

Should gay or lesbian couples be allowed by law to marry? Should some form of domestic partnership be recognized as an alternative to marriage, perhaps for heterosexual couples also? Should lesbians and gay men conceive and rear children? Is there really any single way of being 'family' nowadays? Such questions preoccupy

citizens and policy-makers alike at the dawn of the new millennium, not only in the United States but in parliaments and public squares around the world. Just a month before the Vermont debate, Canada amended its federal regulations pertaining to spouses to extend to same-sex couples all rights and obligations enjoyed by those of mixed sex. The weekend prior to that, thousands of noisy demonstrators gathered in Paris to protest against the French government's decision to offer unmarried couples, regardless of gender, many benefits and duties that French married couples receive. '*Oui au mariage*' (yes to marriage), they chanted, implying that those who would not, or could not, marry should not be entitled to equality in the eyes of the law.

But if it looks like a duck, and it walks like a duck, is it then a duck ... ? Nowhere in the world as yet can same-sex couples actually marry under exactly the same terms and in exactly the same manner as their heterosexual counterparts. Although the conservative owners of the little yellow ducks in Vermont failed to defeat the civil unions bill, they did successfully reserve the word 'marriage' for the union of a man and a woman. Likewise, Canadian law recognizes only married persons as spouses and classifies gay and lesbian partners along with unmarried heterosexual couples of at least twelve months duration as common

law mates. And the French government has never proposed extending *marriage* itself to those whom it now legally acknowledges as registered partners.

But that marriage, and such related issues as the legal relationship of a non-biological parent to his or her children, should have become part of the much-raumbed 'homosexual agenda' at all would have appeared ludicrous had anyone prophesied it even a short time ago. Most gay libertarians of the 1960s and 1970s had no interest in imitating or assimilating into heterosexual norms. Those who first broke down the tightly secured door of the closet, deliberately spilling its contents all over the floor, never imagined they might be clearing the way for a new culture of domesticity. The queens of Stonewall so quickly laid to one side by gay and lesbian couples proudly chasing the latest advances in reproductive technology in the quest for their own little princess and princesses – who would have guessed it?

In this chapter we examine the queer political environment in which our putative ducklings – gay and lesbian families in their many plumed varieties – must sink or swim. In the course of what follows, we ask whether lesbian, gay, and other queer genres of kinship represent the brave new families of the twenty-first century, pointing to ways that those in more conventional families might also renegotiate the demands of love and labor. Or conversely, does the gay movement's embrace of family discourse in fact signify capitulation – a retirement from activism to couch potato viewing of *Leave It to Beaver* re-runs?

#### NO PLACE LIKE HOME: THE POSTMODERN FAMILY CONDITION

Let us begin with a bird's eye view of the context in which queer families of all kinds have hatched. The first thing to notice is how easily these fowl blend into their surrounding terrain. An image of 'Beaver' rather than a duck evokes the 'fabled family

of Western nostalgia', signifying the bygone 1950s' era of the modern nuclear family system to which we can no longer return. *Leave It to Beaver*, a popular TV sitcom of that era, idealized a world when proper men were breadwinners and proper women homemakers, when marriage was for life and homosexuality was not a fit topic for family dinner table conversation. However, even before the sitcom could make it into reruns, a global post-industrial world began to supplant the industrial economy that had underwritten the Cleavers' family regime.

The 'patriarchal bargain' of the modern family order (Kandiyoti, 1988) – in which women subordinated their individual interests to those of husbands and children in exchange for economic support and social respectability – would soon unravel. Rates of maternal employment, developments in contraception and reproductive technology, and no-fault divorce petitions advanced apace, while feminist and gay liberation movements spurred women and men to question received understandings of gender, sexuality, and family life and to pursue what sociologist Anthony Giddens (1992) terms the modern ideal of a 'pure relationship' of 'confluent love'.

In place of the supposedly 'normal' American family immortalized by 1950s' sitcoms, most people today seek love and intimacy within the denaturalized world of the postmodern family condition. The post-modern family represents no new normal family structure, but instead an irreversible condition of family diversity, choice, flux, and contest. The sequence and packaging of romance, courtship, love, marriage, sex, conception, gestation, parenthood, and death are no longer predictable. Now that there is no consensus on the form a normal family should assume, every kind of family has become an alternative family. Lesbian or queer families occupy pride of place in this cultural smorgasbord which includes familiar varieties that were historically most prevalent among the poor – such as stepfamilies, unwed motherhood, blended families, bi-national families, divorce-extended kin,

cohabiting coupledom, and grandparent-headed families – along with such newer developments as at-home fatherhood, dead-beat dads, and open adoption – as well as innovations made possible by new commerce and technology – surrogacy, sperm banks, ovum exchange, genetic screening, gender selection, frozen embryos, and the no-longer-distant specter of human cloning.

As family innovators proliferate, the mass media energetically broadcast provocative images on a global scale. British journalists gave front-page coverage in late 1999 to the story of a gay male couple who challenged the time-honored passage of citizenship through the mother's line. Returning home to London with infant twins borne by an American surrogate mother, the two men were identified as 'parent one' and 'parent two' on the babies' birth certificates (Gibb, 1999; BBC, 2000). Singer Melissa Etheridge, her former partner Julie Cypher, and David Crosby, their proud celebrity sperm donor, have graced the glossy pages of entertainment monthlies as symbols of new ways to be family. Hollywood gave its first twenty-first century Oscar for best actress to Hilary Swank for her performance as the transgendered 'boyfriend' of Chloe Sevigny in *Boys Don't Cry* (to traditionalists' dismay, the transgendered can truly quack like ducks by legally entering into marriage with a 'same-gendered' partner). And in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, the young son of one of the bus travelers is portrayed enthusiastically applauding the drag show that dad and his mates perform in a little Australian outback town where the boy lives with his mother.

Of course, similar topics now grace the pages of academic journals in numerous disciplines (from sociology, psychology and law, to political science, anthropology, and cultural studies, religion, history, and medicine). Whereas appropriate motherhood has long been the focus of scholarly debate, now fathers too have become contested subjects – whether as deadbeat or at-home dads, or as cells in turkey basters. Scholars on the conservative end of the

spectrum have begun to claim that not only can children experience too little fathering (as in the case of fathers absent through disappearance or divorce, imprisonment or inertia), but also too much (as in the case of gay men co-parenting).

Perhaps it should not surprise us that the sight of such unfamiliar courses of intimacy gives conservative diners indigestion. Confronted by so much novelty, threatened forces train their rifles at the handiest targets, and campaigns for lesbian/gay family rights have become difficult to miss. Queer families occupy the vanguard of the post-modern family condition, because they make the denaturalized and contingent character of family and kinship impossible to ignore. How irresistible these sitting ducks must appear to backlash troops mustered for target practice; and their frustration can only be magnified as they begin to suspect the futility of their cause. For by the turn of the millennium, it was already obvious that the historic move toward the legalization of gay marriage had gathered such a head of steam that was it no longer a matter of *if*, but of *when* or *where* it would first secure full legal status. And indeed, in April 2001, the Netherlands led the way and same gendered couples began to be wed. Other nations seem likely to follow suit, including Denmark, Sweden, Canada, and Norway.

Even in the United States, where progress will undoubtedly be slower, popular anti-gay sentiment is steadily declining. Early in 2000, *Newsweek* conducted a poll which showed 83 per cent of all Americans favoring protection from discrimination at work for gay people (up from 56 per cent in 1977), with almost 60 per cent considering gay partners entitled to shared health benefits, and more than one-third supporting the legalization of gay marriage (Leland, 2000). Those viewing homosexuality as a sin were down to 46 per cent (from 54 per cent only two years earlier, in 1998). And indeed, in California, a poll taken in the aftermath of a bitterly fought ballot initiative – designed to restrict marriage to the union of a man and a woman – indicated that the 'debate' itself

raised consciousness in this regard: while 42 per cent of Californians said they considered homosexuality morally wrong, no fewer than 54 per cent came out against homophobia (Warren, 2000). Another poll found 41 per cent of all Americans saying yes to civil unions as a means of extending benefits normally associated with marriage (*Los Angeles Times*, 2000). Early French surveys concerning the new civil unions (*paces civile de solidarité*, or PACS, as the French more colorfully name them) indicated that almost half the population approved of offering them to gay and lesbian couples, and an even greater percentage supported PACS for straight couples. Indeed, startlingly high numbers of heterosexuals have presented themselves to be 'PACS-ed' even though for them marriage remains an option (*New York Times*, 2000).

But although other nations have surged ahead of the United States on the road to making marriage open to all, jurisdictions in the USA lead in providing legal pathways for planned lesbian/gay parenthood. Here, dramatic legal, popular, and technological gains in the area of lesbian and gay parental rights have preceded the advent of civil unions or marriage. Consistent with this trend, the *Newsweek* poll (Leland, 2000) showed a higher proportion of respondents favoring adoption rights for gay partners (39 per cent) than the percentage approving marriage (34 per cent).

#### QUEER FAMILY VALUES: A CASE OF CONFORMITY?

Although gay family rights issues now enjoy immense grassroots support among lesbians and gay men in many corners of the world, not all gay theorists or activists find this trend lucky. The same ideological and strategic differences that characterize other contemporary lesbian, gay, and queer discourses undergird the family quarrels: should the ultimate goal be normalization or subversion? Do the politics of accommodation or resistance promise to pave the royal road to 'Home'?

Scholars and activists of diverse ideological leanings continue to debate the consequences of legalizing same-sex marriage. They ask whether it augurs to democratize and degender the institution of marriage, or simply to exacerbate existing inequalities between haves and have-nots, couples and singles, women and men, and among members of different racial and ethnic groups. Would gay marriage increase social acceptance of lesbians and gays, or would it merely promote sexual conservatism and conformist, white picket-fence values?

Lesbian and gay studies scholars also cross quills over domestic partnership legislation. Is this best viewed as a desirable and even preferable alternative, a strategic stepping stone, or as a second-class stepchild to full marriage rights? Similarly, what can be said about the current character of gay family relationships? Are they indeed more egalitarian and less violent than their heterosexual counterparts, as enthusiasts frequently claim? Are gay people – gay male people in particular – less inclined to monogamy, and if so, is that cause for regret or applause? Are queer family forms inherently more innovative, more unstable, and/or more considered than mainstream ones?

At the very least it is evident that lesbians and gay men do not share a common set of family values with each other, not to mention with those who occupy less common frequencies on the queer rainbow bandwidth. Indeed, the very notion of 'queer family values' is somewhat oxymoronic, signifying a quixotic wish to fuse subversion with normalization. Even so, for just this reason queer family values may serve as a fitting paradoxical figure to represent the paradigmatic paradoxes of postmodern intimacy! After examining some of the thickest and thorniest of these debates, we will argue for the somewhat frustrating claim that the best answer to most of these questions is 'all of the above'. That is to say, contemporary lesbian/gay or queer family agendas necessarily house elements of liberation and accommodation, political success and co-option, hand in hand.

#### RIGHTS AND RITES: THE DEBATE OVER MARRIAGE

Perhaps nowhere do disagreements over queer family values proceed as visibly or with such volatility as in the debate over legalizing same-sex marriage. While momentum for this goal gathers popular force, gay and lesbian scholars and activists continue to disagree over whether campaigning for the right to marry represents a subversive or normalizing project – or both. Disputes still rage, as anthropologist Ellen Lewin (1998) notes in her engaging book about gay weddings, *Recognizing Ourselves: Ceremonies of Lesbian and Gay Commitment*, 'over whether same-sex marriage constitutes a callow effort to fit into the mainstream or a bold rebellion against the limitations of a rigid gender hierarchy' (ibid.: 35).

In some respects, the major fault lines in the seismic terrain lie between a moderate reformism and a radical oppositional stance, between national gay rights organizations and queer direct action politics, and to some extent along gender and racial lines, with comparatively affluent, socially ambitious, white gay men typically more enthusiastic and prominent in the drive for marriage rights than less privileged, more dissident, lesbian feminists and gay people of color. In fact, lesbian critic Julie Abraham (2000) goes so far – perhaps a bit too far – as to charge that 'the new gay and lesbian constituency being constructed through the marriage debates is a wholly white, conventionally gendered as well as sexually circumspect crowd...'. However, one of the more attractive (or pernicious, depending on one's standpoint) features of the marriage debate is that scholars do not all line up neatly as pro-marriage conservatives on one side and anti-marriage libertines on the other. Instead, arguments for opening matrimony to all corners, regardless of gender combination can be, and are, readily made from feminist, radical, liberal, and conservative corners alike. Likewise, cogent cases

against the gay marriage crusade rest upon equivalent incommensurate ideological underpinnings – including queer theory, feminism, socialism, anarchism, and libertarianism, along with the more obvious and unadmitted conservative religious doctrines and unadulterated homophobic sentiments.

The intra-community debate over gay marriage was forcefully joined in 1989 in a now classic pair of articles by Tom Stoddard and Paula Ettelbrick, both then attorneys with the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund. Responding to Stoddard's (1992) seemingly self-evident equal rights argument that since marriage exists and confers economic and other benefits, it should be open to all, Ettelbrick (1992) took the classic militant position that to affirm marriage ran contrary to the values of gay identity and culture. What of other kinds of relations than monogamous pairings? What of challenging privilege rather than being co-opted into its halls? 'Being queer is more than setting up house, sleeping with a person of the same gender, and seeking state approval for doing so,' she protested.

Criticisms like Ettelbrick's were habitually thrown at those few lesbian and gay couples who dared to venture down the aisle toward even a virtual altar twenty years or more ago. Suzanne Sherman (1992) cites the experience of a lesbian couple who planned a commitment ceremony back then:

We were a very, very small handful of lesbians who got married. We took a lot of flak from other lesbians, as well as heterosexuals. In 1981, we didn't know any other lesbians, not a single one, who had had a ceremony in Santa Cruz, and a lot of lesbians live in that city. Everybody was on our case about it. They said, 'What are you doing?' How heterosexual. We really had to sell it. (ibid.: 191).

Now, however, lesbian and gay weddings routinely receive recognition in mainstream newspapers, through 'bridal' registries, and on prime-time TV, while purveyors of classy (or campy) gay or lesbian wedding commodities mail their catalogs by the thousands. Gay weddings, it seems, are already big business, at least for those who



can afford them. Their political meanings are quite complex, however, often lying, as Lewin (1998) shows, in the eye of the beholder: 'Symbols couples intend to invoke resistance may instead suggest complicity with cultural norms, while other symbols explicitly meant to suggest conformity may be understood to subvert and undermine heteronormativity' (1998: 46). Indeed, as Lewin's book ably demonstrates, the line between rituals of resignation and of resistance is traced on shifting sands.

In an influential 1991 article, 'Marriage, law, and gender: a feminist inquiry', feminist legal theorist Nan Hunter suggested that several events of 1989 served to shift the cultural contours of that line and contributed to a rapidly developing sense that the legalization of marriage for lesbian and gay Americans [was] politically possible at some unknown but not unreachable point in the future' (ibid.: 10). In May 1989, the city of San Francisco became the first major city in the United States to introduce a proposed domestic partnership ordinance, and the California State Bar Association passed a resolution calling upon the state to amend marriage laws to include gay and lesbian couples. In June 1989, Denmark became the first country in the world to open a 'registered partnership' category which conferred upon gay and lesbian couples all of the economic and social benefits of marriage – with the significant exception of rights to parental custody for non-biological parents.

Following rapidly in July, the New York State Court of Appeals issued a landmark ruling in favor of a gay partner's claim to protection from eviction, based upon his 'family' relation to the deceased tenant-of-record. And in August, New York City Mayor Ed Koch authorized bereavement leave for the domestic partners of city employees. Within this context, the tide of gay and lesbian resistance to gay marriage began to ebb, reconfiguring and layering the shifting contours of the ideological shoreline.

It's about sex discrimination, pure and simple – not gay rights, not privacy, not freedom of intimate association, but just sex

discrimination – gay legal activists argued in the 1993 Hawaiian state court case, an argument which reverberated so widely that the prospect of gay marriage at once became a national electoral issue. It's also about family values, added Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund attorney Evan Wolfson (1994:95), commenting during the Hawaii case for which he was the plaintiffs' lead attorney: 'Inclusion at the level of marriage is uniquely revolutionary, conservatively subversive, singularly faithful to true American and family values in a way that few, if any, other gay and lesbian victories would be' (ibid.: 580).

Marriage is worth fighting for, posits philosopher Richard Mohr (1994), not just for equal rights or benefits but because it defines and creates social relations. It is a conduit for justice at times of crisis such as illness, death, or financial collapse. And, lest anyone be concerned about its sexual shackles, it is plainly compatible with non-mongamy, he adds: if the ability of many gay men to sustain long-term relationships built on factors other than promises of sexual exclusivity is not witness enough, look to the fact that adultery has been widely decriminalized for heterosexuals in recent decades!

The debate is also about redefining the entire institution of marriage, say those who share Tom Stoddard's (1992) reading that marriage 'may be unattractive and even oppressive as it is currently structured and embrace same-sex couples would necessarily transform it into something new' (ibid.: 13). Indeed, marriage is a state long associated with changing mores, as Nan Hunter (1991) expounds. Even its recent history demonstrates that rigid institutionalizations of gender (or race) have frequently been rapidly discarded as times change: the courts no longer hold to their once key assumption of a husband's authority over his wife, for example, and bans on interracial marriage seem to belong to another era (despite the fact that the last existing such ban, in Alabama, was eliminated only in 1999,

more than thirty years after the 1967 *Loving vs. Virginia* Supreme Court decision striking down miscegenation laws). Hunter deduces, therefore, that marriage itself would be enriched and democratized rather than damaged by opening it to same-gendered partners, since this would serve to 'radically denaturalize the social and political construction of male/female difference as authority/dependence relationships that courts have deemed essential to the definition of marriage' (1991: 9). Marriage is simply a social construction without any natural existence outside of particular laws and customs, she asserts, and as cultures change, marriage changes with them.

It is clearly the case that marriage has carried vastly different meanings in different times and places, and does still to this day among different classes and social groups, as lesbian social historian E.J. Graff (1999) documents in her aptly-named volume, *What is Marriage For? The Strange Social History of our Most Intimate Institution*. Time was when the vast civil disobedience of young heterosexuals today, living in pairs in great numbers without benefit of marriage, would have been considered greatly shocking. Today more people are shocked by past generations' assumptions that marriage was primarily about the transfer of estate and other property (including the bride herself) from one family to another. For not until the messy marriage law reforms of the eighteenth century did the day dawn when, in Graff's words, 'marriage for love – long the dubious privilege of the poor, nearly a guarantee of penury, a weird refusal to see that one could love wherever duty lay – started to become its own holy ideal all across the West' (1999: 26).

Perhaps the most significant historical shift with regard to the meaning of marriage at the present time, however, has been the recognition in most quarters that procreation is no longer its necessary complement or goal. Lewin (1998) notes that even those who cannot have sexual relations at all (on account of physical disability, or incarceration, for

example) are nowadays encouraged to marry for the 'spiritual' or cultural worth of doing so. And once the time arrives that marriage is sacred even without babies, (Graff 1999, flags the 1965 Supreme Court ruling in *Griswold vs. Connecticut* on contraception as a private matter between couples, as such a moment), then the exclusion from the married state of those for whom sexual relations can never lead to natural conception becomes more tenuous. Hence, like Hunter (1991), Graff believes that same-sex marriage can deal a feminist *coup de grâce* to male supremacy: 'Same-sex marriage will imply that the sexes are deeply and fundamentally equal' (ibid.: 159).

However, unlike Hunter, Graff has no objection to the likelihood that 'opening marriage to same-sex couples may well shift our society's sexual dividing line from the current and temporary line between homosexual and heterosexual back to one more historically familiar, a divide between monogamous and promiscuous' (ibid.: 190). But this is simply shameless capitulation to suburban conformity, scoff many critics from within. Queer theorists and leftists often charge that the recent outbreak of 'mad vow disease', as one witty, scornful critic dubbed the gay marriage campaign (Kate Clinton in Warner, 1999), uncritically embraces bourgeois values, monogamy, and state regulation of intimacy. Emulating heterosexual marriage will strengthen the inequitable and repressive status quo, they complain, for what happily married gay or lesbian couple will turn around to oppose the assignment of benefits they thereby gain? 'In the modern era,' Michael Warner charges, 'marriage has become the central legitimating institution by which the state penetrates the sexuality of its subjects; it is the "zone of privacy" outside which sex is unprotected' (1999: 128). Moreover, expanding the marital tent will do more to reinforce than to eradicate gender prescriptions, many lesbian theorists add, unconvinced by Hunter (1991) or Graff (1999). Marriage is an inherently problematic institution, its

practice terminally riddled with patriarchy, Nancy Polkoff (1993) maintains. Likewise, Ruthan Robson (1994) posits that to theorize lesbian relations in the context of family law inevitably serves only to domesticate and depoliticize lesbianism (should lesbians allow themselves the unfortunate compliment of being classed as 'good' sexual deviants if they happen to be monogamous and focused on the family?).

Neoliberal gay male intellectuals, such as Andrew Sullivan (1995, 1997), Jonathan Rauch (1994), and Bruce Bawer (1993), unabashedly embrace the goal of opening marriage to gay men and lesbians in precisely these terms, explicitly endorsing the assimilationist project. They do not wish to change anything about the institution of marriage beyond the mixed-gender entry permit to its privileged status, for they champion the very conservative family, sexual, gender, and property values that most queer theorists, lesbians, and feminists oppose. Sullivan goes so far as to suggest that opening social rites such as marriage to gay men and lesbians is the most that a democratic society can tolerate, and that efforts to fight discrimination in other environments cross the line of acceptability. Teasing opponents of gay marriage in terms calculated to raise hackles in both conservative and progressive quarters, he proposes: 'Since persecution is not an option in a civilized society, why not coax gays into traditional values rather than rail incoherently against them?' (1989: 22).

Traditional values, of course, are precisely what more radical critics reject. Echoes of the feminist 'sex wars' and of the queer theory 'sex panic' debate reverberate in the controversy over gay marriage. Radicals do not wish merely to expand access to a one-size-fits-all garment, but rather to redesign and multiply the models for intimacy, sexuality, and kinship available in the family wardrobe. They disagree among themselves, however, over whether marriage should remain one of the selections on the rack. 'The strategic question facing lawyers,' as Warner explains, 'is whether to

extend benefits and recognition even further beyond conventional marriage or to extend the status of marriage and thereby restrict entitlements and recognition to it' (1999: 138). Warner represents a dwindling number of white gay male opponents of same-sex marriage, but many lesbian and feminist theorists, such as Robson (1994), Abraham (2000), and Martha Fineman (1995), still advocate a politics of resistance, aiming to abolish policies that make benefits contingent upon marital status, or indeed to discard the category of 'family' altogether.

But of course such an approach readily attracts the charge of unattainable utopianism, as political theorist Valerie Lehr (1999) notes, in *Queer Family Values: Debunking the Myth of the Nuclear Family*: 'Political theory can provide powerful arguments against seeking inclusion into the institution of marriage, but these arguments may have little persuasive power for lesbian and gay couples trying to confront challenges such as the denial of health care benefits to partners' (ibid.: 30). And as political events unfolded over the 1990s, even former critics like Eitelbrick began to draw closer to the pro-marriage fold. Interviewed in 2000 by a *New York Times* reporter just after Vermont approved civil unions, Eitelbrick acknowledged that she and her partner had 'always told each other in good feminist fashion that they would never marry'; but, she confessed:

I will admit to being very awed by the developments in Vermont, and just personally, it has made me rethink the opportunity it might provide for me and for my children ... The possibility of a border state to New York allowing something like this is very emotional, and part of it is that it signifies a very long road to being included as citizens of this country. (in Goldberg, 2000)

As Warner concedes,

It is possible, at least in theory, to imagine a politics in which sex-neutral marriage is seen as a step toward the more fundamental goals of sexual justice: not just formal equality before the law, based on a procedural bar to discrimination, but a substantive justice that would target sexual domination, making possible a democratic cultivation of alternative sexualities. (1999: 124)

To do so, however, would require articulating this more liberatory vision in the public discourse of the gay marriage crusade, because, as Warner correctly notes, 'the public sphere in which the discussion takes place is one of the contexts that *define* marriage' (ibid.: 149). Warner charges that the advocates of gay marriage have not made this case.

We disagree somewhat. As we have shown, some feminists like Hunter (1991), Eitelbrick (1992), and Lehr (1999) do indeed advocate marriage as part of a liberatory vision not only of sexuality, but of gender and social justice as well. However, their more critical and visionary perspectives rarely make their way into the circumscribed and polarized discursive constructs through which the mainstream media and the male-dominated national gay press and rights organizations produce and circulate 'the gay marriage debate'. Like these more marginalized voices, we would wish to decouple most individual economic and social entitlements from the already socially privileged domain of coupledom. However, particularly in a society like the United States in which there are scant grounds for presuming that the institution of marriage will soon fade away, and in which grassroots support for same-sex marriage is so keen, it strikes us as both elitist and politically misguided for more critical voices to cede the discursive struggle over marriage to the assimilationist camp.

#### SEPARATE BUT EQUAL? DOMESTIC PARTNERSHIP AND OTHER ALTERNATIVE MODELS

Paradoxically, while queer and feminist theorists wish to resist the normalizing implications of same-sex marriage, no nation or state has yet dared to present such an option to same-sex couples. Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Germany, Finland, France, Vermont ... all have chosen the politically 'safer' bargain of domestic

partnership as a way of offering such couples most, but not all, of the benefits of marriage. Other states and nations are moving in this direction (at the time of writing, Canada, Australia, South Africa, and Israel and also some US states, including California, have created variations on the 'common-law spouse' theme). But though conservative opponents in Vermont view civil unions as tantamount to marriage (if it quacks like a duck, remember?), gay and lesbian couples who seek the same rights and benefits as other citizens are barely likely to be satisfied with anything that merits the tag 'separate but equal'. Separate has never proven equal before, they rightly aver. That the French PACS are proving highly attractive to young straight couples wanting a pledge of their commitment to one another but not yet ready to plunge fully into marriage, indicates that the two are not the same. And indeed, it is hard to sustain any argument that says domestic partnership is not a second-class status so long as marriage remains an exclusively heterosexual institution.

This does not mean, however, that domestic partnership is inherently an inferior family form. Anyone disliking a one-size-fits-all model is predisposed to consider alternative arrangements for creating family a worthy goal (the sting remaining, of course, that something 'alternative' must indeed be an alternative and not the only choice available). In fact, many queer and feminist theorists prefer domestic partnership over marriage as an option for those who so desire, given the historical ties of marriage to other unwanted baggage. Valerie Lehr (1999) reminds her readers that the gay liberation movement sprang up in the midst of a far broader questioning of a racist, sexist, capitalist economy. Nothing that current family narratives (in the West) contain assumptions rooted in the consolidation of industrial capitalism, and tracing the ways in which those of other classes and ethnic backgrounds have rarely been able (or wanted?) to initiate the privatized household of families headed by a middle-class, white, male wage-earner, she urges leaving

aside the values of the dominant culture and creating a new ethical framework that allows for traditional ways without excluding other choices.

Feminist legal theorist Martha A. Fineman (1995) proposes a more fundamental rejection of Western definitions of family, arguing that making the sexual pairing of adults the root of family is misguided because it renders women and children economically vulnerable to the vagaries of adult erotic and emotional attachments. Risking the charge of gender 'essentialism', Fineman calls instead for making the mother-child unit the base for state support and, where necessary, intervention. Meanwhile, queer theorists such as Warner (1993, 1999) and Frank Browning (1994) oppose allowing monogamous sexual coupling of any kind to serve as the basis for entitlements or regulation.

Others call for wide-ranging redefinitions of marriage, or of what Fineman calls the sexual family. Neil Miller, for example, quotes a Danish lesbian activist as saying, 'If I am going to marry it will be with one of my oldest friends in order to share pensions and things like that. But I'd never marry a lover. That is the advantage of being married to a close friend. Then, you never have to marry a lover!' (1992: 350). Of course, as Fireman (1995) and others protest, the question left begging is why pensions, health benefits, and so forth should ever have been tied to marital status in the first place. In Scandinavian societies, where this is not the case, all children and adults receive such basic entitlements, and child poverty has been nearly eradicated.

Hunter, fruitfully in our view, advocates offering domestic partnership alongside marriage, multiplying options in the direction of greater family diversity for all. On the one hand, she concludes, domestic partnerships 'go farthest from removing the state from the regulation of intimate relationships' (1991: 24); but, on the other hand, she asks whether this is always a good thing, since non-interference from the state in family matters has historically served chiefly to buttress patriarchy. Moreover,

Hunter adds, domestic partnerships may be more of a burden for those with fewer financial resources since they still lack protections which must then be added by cumbersome and costly legal processes. But simply removing the bar to same-sex marriage would provide nothing by way of alternative, and would limit the ways by which those who so desired could challenge its customs.

That is why the 'all of the above' approach – extending both marriage and domestic partnership to any and all comers – seems the best strategy for addressing the inherent diversity and contradictions of the postmodern family condition. Moreover, any public debate that considers expanding civil rights and protecting sexual (or other) minorities from abuse and discrimination has political value in itself. More at issue, perhaps, are the most effective political strategies for achieving these goals. Impatient with the extravagant drain of labor and finances needed to resist – defensively, and unsuccessfully – the wave of backlash state initiatives designed to pre-empt same-sex marriage, critics such as Eric Rofes (2000) and William Rubenstein (2000) have proposed the more 'up close and personal' strategy of a marital boycott. Until such time as marriage is open to all, they ask sympathetic heterosexuals to refuse to collude with their heterosexual privilege, and they challenge queer folks to turn down invitations to attend legal weddings with pointed explanations as to their reason for so doing. But to those who continue to insist that even talking about gay marriage is reactionary, Evan Wolfson simply replies, 'The ship has sailed' (1994-95: 660). Marriage is on the gay agenda, like it or not.

#### HEATHER'S MOMMIES AND OTHER RELATIVES: RESEARCHING QUEER FAMILIES

In a cartoon published not so long ago in the *New Yorker*, a brisk-looking elementary

school teacher poses a decidedly postmodern math problem to her young charges. 'If Heather has two mommies,' she asks, 'and each of them has two brothers, and one of those brothers has another man for a "room-mate", how many uncles does Heather have?'<sup>1</sup> The question artfully exposes the way in which the mapping of a family tree, a project rather more commonly assigned by elementary school teachers, is problematic to a child whose family does not match assumed genealogical norms. Must a household reflect some particular cultural pattern (father, mother, and 2.1 children of assorted gender, for example) in order to be considered a family by others?

The notion of 'families we choose' (the discourse-setting title of anthropologist Kath Weston's 1991 study of lesbian and gay families in and around San Francisco) challenges essentialist understandings of kinship. Weston identified the widespread gay experience of rejection by families of origin and the need to construct alternative support structures (a need dramatically heightened by the first ravages of the AIDS epidemic among gay men), as foundational to the creativity with which lesbians and gay men began structuring their own families of choice during the last decades of the twentieth century. Multi-household support networks, the blending of selected biological and chosen kin, early lesbian experiments in planned parenthood via donor insemination were but some of the 'chosen' family forms she investigated.

*Families We Choose* rightly serves as a portal into the lesbian and gay studies literature on family formation, for it presciently traced the historic shift – at a time when that shift was still young and raw – from the anti-family stance of the early gay liberation movement to the sense of entitlement increasingly voiced by gays and lesbians in their struggle for family recognition and rights as enjoyed by others. Such demands, as Weston noted, are not inherently reactionary, reformist, or even progressive. Whether gay family discourse replicates or resists mainstream family 'values' depends

upon the particular social and political context. She read the move toward establishing families of choice as a sign of a growing sense of political confidence and entitlement among lesbians and gay men. Even Weston might have been surprised, however, to find that within the decade, gay and lesbian parents and their children would become the feted subjects of cover stories in *Newsweek* and other mainstream publications.

#### AND BABY MAKES THREE (OR TWO, OR FIVE): PARENTING IN QUEER FAMILIES

How many uncles does – or should – Heather acknowledge, indeed? And a few years later, will students find themselves asking in high school biology how Heather herself was conceived ... by artificial insemination from one of the uncles to his sister's female partner, or by sperm donated by an unknown biological 'parent' (or even, nowadays, sperm stored by one of the 'moms' in anticipation of a lesbian coupling, prior to her undergoing male-to-female sex reassignment surgery)? With ovum exchange or fusion? With a pre-birth custody decree attached? Or one of the many other variants rapidly gaining in popularity? Two or more gay men sharing with one, two or more women in the raising of children sharing all their genetic material? And any other co-mothers out there? A former partner, perhaps, and her own new partner, all equally, or perhaps competitively, devoted to Heather and to her healthy growth to maturity? Or non-sexual co-parents, defying the modern Western norm that the family be inherently sexual by definition? Or other kinship relations consciously forged in ways that might be emulated by heterosexual parents also?

The 'gay-by boom' (or, more accurately, 'lesbby boom') of the past two decades has been nothing short of spectacular. By the late 1970s, as Weston (1991) documented, lesbians on the west coast and in other urban

centers of the United States had begun deciding to bear their own biological children (aided by new assisted reproduction techniques). By the 1990s, gay men were joining the planned parenthood brigade, via adoption, surrogacy, or joint parenting arrangements. Prior to this time, of course, children raised by gay men or lesbians had typically been born in the context of an earlier heterosexual relationship, and few parents who came out of the closet in those days were able to win contests for custody of their children.

Heterosexual procreation and parenthood, after all, represent the ideological lynchpin of Western gender and family conventions. The advent of planned lesbian and gay parenting has spawned a growing mixture of political controversies in the USA and Europe, as well as a new social science industry. Do children need a biological or a social father? A mother? All, or none of the above? Are lesbian and gay parents better, worse, or different from straight parents, and how do their children fare? Queer parenting experiments and the custody rights issues these pose have, interestingly, birthed a natural laboratory for the study of the effects of parental gender and sexual orientation upon child development.

As might be expected, conservative scholars have predicted dire outcomes; and their pejorative views dominated the perspectives of judges and legislators who dealt with the first wave of child custody conflicts and demands. Conservatives claim, for example, that homosexual parents are more sexually promiscuous and more likely to molest their own children; that their children suffer a greater risk of losing a parent to AIDS, substance abuse, or suicide; that the children are more apt to be confused about gender and sexual identities and to become homosexual themselves; that the social stigma and embarrassment of having a homosexual parent unfairly ostracize children and damage their ability to form peer relationships, and that as a consequence of all this, such children suffer higher levels of depression and other emotional difficulties

(e.g. Cameron and Cameron, 1996; Cameron, et al., 1996; Wardle, 1997). Opponents of homosexual parenthood insist also that children of lesbians suffer the supposed ill effects of 'fatherlessness'. 'It is now undeniable,' a Brigham Young professor of family law asserts, 'that, just as a mother's influence is crucial to the secure, healthy, and full development of a child, [a] paternal presence in the life of a child is essential to the child emotionally and physically' (Wardle, 1997: 860).

On the contrary, although the research record has limitations, more than two decades of studies have failed to substantiate such claims. The vast majority of studies to date attempt to compare child outcomes among offspring reared by heterosexual and lesbian mothers. However, since most of these children were born within heterosexual marriages which later dissolved, it has proved very difficult to isolate the effects of parental sexual orientation from such factors as divorce, coming out, step-parenting, or declines and other changes in living standards. But a new literature is growing up as fast as the children themselves, to study the children of self-identified lesbians and gay men consciously choosing to become parents through various means.

This research remains fledgling and constrained by methodological challenges, but thus far researchers almost uniformly report no meaningful differences in the measures of child outcomes they have employed; and this emerging social scientific consensus has helped to shift custody policies and decisions in a more progressive direction. Over time, increasing numbers of state courts and legislatures are extending custody, adoption, and foster care rights to lesbian and gay parents. Not surprisingly, this trend has provoked a backlash assault on the reputed ideological purposes of such research and renewed, sporadically successful, efforts to restrict parenting rights explicitly to heterosexuals.<sup>2</sup>

The available research, however, in our view, suffers more from its defensive response to homophobia than from ideological

partisanship. For although few reputable social scientists now subscribe to the view that homosexual parents subject their children to serious risks, too many sympathetic researchers have felt compelled to adopt an implicitly heteronormative defense of gay parenting which accepts heterosexual parenting as the gold standard and therefore sets out to investigate whether or not homosexual parents are indeed inferior. Too often scholars seem to believe that this precludes discovering any differences in child outcomes at all. Thus a characteristically defensive review of research on lesbian-mother families concludes: 'a rapidly growing and highly consistent body of empirical work has failed to identify significant differences between lesbian mothers and their heterosexual counterparts or the children raised by these groups. Researchers have been unable to establish empirically that detriment results to children from being raised by lesbian mothers' (Falk, 1994: 151).

While it is easy to understand and sympathize with the reasoning behind this defensive stance, the impulse to downplay or deny any finding of difference serves to forfeit a unique opportunity for exploring the effects of parental gender and sexual identity, ideology, and behavior on children. This is particularly unfortunate for the domain of gender and sexual theory. Indeed, foreclosing the most interesting questions, researchers report findings that some might find perverse, defensively claiming that children of gay and lesbian parents turn out to be heterosexual in virtually the same proportion as those raised by heterosexual parents. However, while there is no evidence that parental sexual orientation *per se* has a notable impact on children's general psychological, intellectual or social development (nor reason that it should, apart from the social stigma involved), it seems as likely as it should be acceptable that gay parents affirmatively expose their children to a greater range of gender and sexual options. Indeed, there are scattered findings in the published studies that support such a view (see Tasker and Golombok, 1997; Stacey and Biblarz, 2001).

Moreover, should the day in fact come when homosexuality is no longer stigmatized, would it matter anyway how many kids did turn out to be gay? It should seem self-evident to all but the most biased observer that more heterosexual parents, as well as the dominant culture, are likely to attempt to influence their children to follow in their heterosexual footsteps than are gay parents to deliberately 'bring their kids up gay' (to quote Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's teasingly titled monograph). As Sedgwick (1993: 76) wryly notes, 'advice on how to help your kids turn out gay, not to mention your students, your parishioners, your therapy clients, or your military subordinates, is less ubiquitous than you might think'.

The other minor differences reported in the research on lesbian parenting derive from the special demographic characteristics, values, and quality of relationships such parents currently represent. Given the social and economic requisites involved, lesbians (and especially gay men) who choose to become parents tend to be older and better educated than parents in general, and more often reside in urban settings. And as the means of assisted reproduction and independent adoption are more readily available to those in dominant social groups, such parents are more likely to be white and comparatively affluent. Not surprisingly, the majority of studies to date focus on the group easiest to identify, namely, white lesbian mothers in major cities, and their children. Their tantalizing findings prompt a rash of questions in their turn. Lesbian co-mothers studied, for example, seem to have higher parenting skills than heterosexual stepfathers. But is this related to their sexual orientation, their gender, or other factors? Do gay fathers parent any differently than dads in general, and, if so, why? Would the findings be the same if more racially diverse populations of gay parents were included? And, indeed, are the very categories 'lesbian mother' and 'gay father' ethnocentric, historically transitional and conceptually flawed, as queer theory would imply, since they presume sexual orientation

to be fixed and dichotomous rather than fluid, inconsistent, and more multiple? Might we not learn more of interest by studying the gender and number of parents in given families, and their diverse biological and social routes to parenthood, rather than emphasizing effects of their sexual orientation?

Valerie Lehr helpfully summarizes some of the issues researchers might usefully seek to address in this context:

By highlighting the contradictory roles that queer people create when we enter families, we can perhaps identify some of the challenges that queer families pose for dominant understandings of family: How do we understand lesbian non-biological mothers who live with a child's biological mother? Are lesbian partners mothers or fathers in those relationships? Can a lesbian be a father? Similarly, how do we understand the roles played by two male parents? Are they fathers, mothers, or some of each? ... If a child has three or more parents, how do we identify them? (1999: 103).

Or, as Graff (1999) puts it, bemoaning her own lack of legal status as a potential co-parent, "if a dead man, or an uncle, or an absent cuckold, or a holy ghost, or a sperm-bank-supplemented husband can be a sociological 'father,' why can't I?" (ibid.: 105).

#### LIBERTY, EQUALITY, DIVERSITY?

While some researchers spend their efforts measuring lesbian families against tacit heteronormative standards, others are more interested in assessing whether queer family relationships are superior – more liberated and liberating – than the *ancien régime* of compulsory heterosexual marriage and gender-divided parenting. Three prominent areas of current concern involve sexual practice and ethics, distributions of labor and power, and racial or ethnic differences in family formation and ideology.

The thorny issue of variance in sexual practice and ethics is not of course one unique to gay people. Values with regard to monogamy, promiscuity, sexual sport, and

sex outside of love and relationships are ubiquitous subjects of debate among sexual ethicists and the general public, not to mention the US Congress! Many gay men, however, pursue this dispute with particular energy, passion and creativity. For the gay male 'culture of desire' – which queer theorists like Frank Browning (1994) affirm – creates special challenges for those gay men who question the colonization of sexuality in the name of respectability or of redemption or of 'safe' sex after the devastating terrors of AIDS, but who nonetheless seek the semblance of intimate family bonds. Navigating some of the choppiest channels in the currents of eros and domesticity, such gay men experimentally invent new genres of the 'sexual' family. That is precisely what makes homosexuality so threatening to self-appointed defenders of civilization, Browning claims:

What is wrong with us homosexual people to straight society is that we are always available (potentially), what threatens them [sic] is their anxiety that *all* men harbor a desire to be penetrated and to surrender to the universal impulse toward wildness; an impulse that if allowed to go unchecked would proliferate into a thousand jungles of desire. (1994: 100)

Although data on sexual practice is difficult to gather and decode, most research supports the view that quite a few gay men do indeed seem to walk on the wild side with greater abandon than most of the rest of the population. *Homosexualities*, A.P. Bell and M.S. Weinberg's (1978) classic study on this matter, reports quite formidable levels of gay male sexual activity. Almost half of the white gay men interviewed and one-third of black gay men claimed to have had at least 500 different sex partners in their lives, and more than 90 per cent of the white gay men reported 25 partners or more. Moreover, more than one-quarter of the white gay men reported sexual activity with more than 50 partners during the year of the study, a second quarter indicated between 20 and 50, and more than half of the 29 per cent who considered themselves coupled at the time of their interview depicted their relationships

as non-monogamous. Similarly, Gary Dowsett's (1996) *Practicing Desire*, an ethnographic study of gay male sexual practice in Australia, records extensive numbers of sexual partners. The majority of lesbians in the Bell and Weinberg (1978) study, by contrast, claimed to have had fewer than ten partners, with another quarter reporting fewer than five. Almost three-quarters of the women said that they were currently in a stable relationship with another woman which integrated love and sex (despite a culture of jokes about lesbian bed-death), and far more of these than the men believed that sexual infidelity would cause their relationship to fail. And, indeed, despite their greater tolerance for open relationships, Bell and Weinberg record considerable instability in gay male couple relationships.

More recently, voices claim to detect a move away from sexual libertinism, particularly among younger gay men, partly the result of AIDS, and partly a classic historical/political generational shift. Some critics complain that current family discourse represents a conservative retreat from the defense of sexual liberty and pleasure (paralleling feminist sex wars over pornography). 'Sex Panic' critics, like Browning (1994), Warner (1993, 1999), Douglas Crimp (1988), and Kobena Mercer (1994), castigate prominent mainstream gay authors, including Sullivan (1995, 1997), Bawer (1993), Michelangelo Signorile (1997), and Gabriel Rotello (1997), for fostering such a retreat. And while lesbians certainly divide along similar ideological lines, it is as striking as it is unsurprising that this is a discourse dominated by men.

But who, if anyone, dominates the household when couples cannot resort to default mode gender scripts? Studies of the division of domestic labor and power have become a major area of sociological research ever since feminists focused attention on the politics of housework. Because same-sex couples offer an exceptional social laboratory for gender theory and practice, research on how gay and lesbian couples and co-parents share household duties and expenses is a

thriving enterprise, assessing the great gay hope that their relationships are more egalitarian and just than heterosexual ones. The record thus far provides grounds for both self-congratulation and caution. *American Couples*, the 1983 classic study by Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz, which compared married and cohabiting straight couples with their gay male and lesbian counterparts, did find that gender served as a potent determinant across the spectrum of money, work, and sex. Lesbians were most likely to share domestic tasks equally, they reported, and gay men to divide them by interest, but both were more egalitarian and more economically autonomous than married couples. Later studies of lesbian co-parents report similar results. For example, Raymond Chan, Risa Brooks et al. (1998) found that lesbian co-mothers shared childcare tasks more equally than heterosexual parents and that more egalitarian couples were also more satisfied with their relationships. Likewise, Maureen Sullivan (1996) found that lesbian co-parents tended to perform equal childcare duties and enjoy equal status in the home as long as both remained employed. But if one (and not necessarily the birth mother) became a full-time homemaker, her breadwinner partner seemed to assume more of the kind of decision-making power that male breadwinners have traditionally enjoyed. A recent ethnographic study, however, more skeptically asks if such findings owe more to romantic, self-congratulatory ideological investments than to quotidian practice. After closely observing more than fifty families, Christopher Carrington (1999) claims that domestic tasks were, in fact, far from equally shared, but that investment in egalitarianism led lesbians to credit partners who contribute little with more than they in fact do, while dominant gay male partners worked hard to counter any perceived emasculation of the more domesticated partner by stressing that partner's non-domestic activities.

The fond myth that a same-gendered relationship is inherently shielded from patriarchal patterns of dominance and subordination

can even make lesbians and gays particularly vulnerable to more threatening consequences. For it fosters a tendency to deny what divorce lawyers have known all along, namely, that attempts to anchor romantic affairs in the turbulent waters of domesticity are beset by all kinds of dangers, including violence in the home. The emergence of disappointing data pointing to the prevalence of partner abuse among gay men and lesbians – which preliminary surveys indicate to be no less rampant than in heterosexual relationships – has led to community-based efforts to provide domestic violence intervention and prevention services, at least in urban centers (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 1997, 1998, 1999). Service providers emphasize the need for concerted efforts to increase the sensitivity of health care and law enforcement agencies to victims of same-gendered domestic violence.

For example, a battered lesbian rightly fears that her partner can gain the same access as she to the network of women's shelters, and a gay man might report an assault by his partner as perpetrated by a stranger. Confronting the tendency within lesbian and gay groups to deny the existence of such violence remains a major challenge. Lesbians, in particular, have been reluctant to acknowledge that loving women does not in itself grant them immunity from domestic abuse. And feminist theory must confront the complex question of whether and why families in all their new varieties might retain as much potential for violence and danger as when gender seemed to explain all.

However long the 'families we choose' literature may be on matters of liberty and equality, it falls significantly behind – like much else in lesbian and gay studies – on matters of racial and ethnic diversity. This is a disproportionately white discourse, both among authors and subjects, reflecting the unwitting ethnocentrism of categories like gay, queer, and choice. After all, communities constructed around sexual identity tend to be white-dominated in Western countries, because the identification of 'gay' with 'white' points to the relatively privileged

position of those who can afford to make sexuality the central axis of their identity.<sup>3</sup> As the late Joseph Beam, a black gay poet, observed with some bitterness before he died of AIDS: 'We ain't family. Very clearly, gay male means: white, middle-class, youthful, nautalized, and probably butcher: there is no room for black gay men within the confines of this gay pentagon' (1986: 14). And, of course, the word 'family' itself often signifies differently among communities of color, not to mention among peoples of non-Western nations.

Consequently, the emergent literature on the family formations of lesbian/gay people of color builds on the premise that most are likely to regard the racial groups to which they belong as a stronger source of solidarity and identity (and marginality) than they do their sexual affinities. Indeed, lesbian/gay people of color appear to be more apt than whites to remain semi-closed, embedded within their own racial kin groups and neighborhoods, and to pursue homoerotic interests within racial bonds (see, e.g., Hawkeswood, 1996). Keith Boykin, Executive Director of the National Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum, recounts how he came to such a stance: 'The shared racial identity develops a much stronger family bond than any presumed identity based on sexual orientation. I never polled my family members, but ultimately I decided that some would be more disturbed by my dating a white woman, while others would be more upset by my dating a black man' (1996: 23).

Likewise, gay men and lesbians of color are less likely to participate in the planned gayby boom, partly because of economic barriers which disproportionately affect people of color; partly because they are less likely to live within communities which support and foster this choice; and partly because of the relative paucity of non-white sperm donors. As Boykin notes, 'Homophobia and heterosexism are frequently seen not as prejudices but as survival skills for the black race or the black individual' (1996: 167). Black gay and lesbian people – where their existence is even acknowledged – are

sometimes viewed by their own families, communities, and churches as lacking commitment to the race on a similar scale to heterosexuals who intermarry. Boykin admits that a 'black man who dates only men raises the specter of the extinction of the family name, potentially causes embarrassment to the family, and often suggests an irresponsible disregard for the need to create strong, black families' (ibid.: 23). A black gay couple caring for their own children are likely not counted a 'strong, black family' in this sense.

For similar reasons, one finds few gay people of color leading the race to the altar. For some, the gay marriage crusade represents a distraction from more urgent racial causes. Indeed, one can readily make the case that in the USA, access to marriage is becoming a major form of class and race privilege, in addition to its status as an exclusively heterosexual club. Paradoxically, however, gay and lesbian family rights activists of all colors frequently cast themselves as the inheritors of the struggles for black civil rights. They cite the historic Supreme Court decisions, *Loving vs. Virginia*, 1967, which struck down anti-miscegenation laws, and *Palmore vs. Sidoti*, 1984, which affirmed a divorced white woman's right to retain custody of her children after she married a black man, as precedents for granting similar protections to queer marriage and family goals. And beyond the US borders, journalist Neil Miller (1992) found the prospect of gay marriage capturing the imagination of black people in the townships of South Africa, and inspiring gay people the world over. Moreover, because South Africa's post-apartheid constitution is the first in the world to bar discrimination against people on the basis of any social identity, including sexuality, that nation is actively considering full legalization of same-sex marriage and family rights.

Indeed, one can readily argue that the improvisational diversity of family practices which African-Americans and South Africans forged in response to racial subordination and poverty – such as 'other-mothering' and

multi-household families – foreshadowed many features of the postmodern family condition in the West as a whole. Certainly, the explosive national discourse on black 'matriarchy' in the USA provoked by the 1965 *Moyrhan Report* foreshadowed preoccupations of the contemporary politics of 'family values' more generally, as in the Murphy Brown discourse. That is why, in theory, it seems clear that forging a 'rainbow coalition' to support queer family values could benefit both communities of color and gay people of every hue. Translating such theory into practice, however, will require far more awareness and respect than has yet been achieved for the genuine diversity of family definitions, priorities and vulnerabilities that divide racial and ethnic communities here and elsewhere.

#### SO DUCK OR NO DUCK?

If it looks like a duck, and it walks like a duck, and it quacks like a duck, then is it a duck? We began by asking whether the Vermont experiment in creating civil unions for same-sex couples represents marriage in all but name. So does it? Does the demand of so many lesbian and gay people, in so many parts of the world at once, for equal recognition of their pairings prestage an irreversible move toward the embrace of conventional forms of family life? Are lesbian/gay family forms really just the same as everyone else's, differing only by the gender combination of sexually-bonded adults? Does gay marriage really threaten to undo civilization, as conservatives fear? As Frank Browning observes, 'Worse even than the sexual perversions they practice, gay people's more damning threat to traditionalists is their claim to family parity, their claim to family life as a right' (1994: 142). Given our claim that queer family developments signal the frontier of global changes in family structure inherent in the postmodern family condition, we could say that in that sense, families created by

lesbians and gay men are truly not distinct from other families. They simply heighten the visibility of the fact of irreversible diversity. They bring us face to face with inescapable contests over legitimate relations of gender, sexuality, and family. The decline of the modern (Western) nuclear family system, as we have noted, has left us with no prevailing culturally mandated family pattern – as any third-grader trying to fill in those blanks on a traditional family tree quickly discovers. All forms of intimacy now contend with instability, contradiction, experimentation. Yet family life itself has by no means been discarded. Instead, many are reinventing it with ingenuity and passion. And here gay men and women (and especially those who defy dichotomization as men or women at all) are leading the pack.

The political meanings of family sentiments, practices, and discourse among gay men and lesbians cannot be defined by checking any one box (progressive, reactionary, and so forth), other than the one marked 'all of the above'. Most reforms are two-edged, often contradictory, and can be read as progressive and co-optive, subversive and accommodationist all at once, depending upon social, economic, and political contexts. Extending marriage to same-gendered couples, as we saw, could simultaneously redefine the institution by eroding gender meanings and homophobia, but also exacerbate class inequities and couple privilege, further marginalizing the single, dissidents, sexual radicals, and all who lack economic resources. Choosing to bear children might help to combat homophobia as Heather's mommies take their place as soccer moms, at PTA meetings, and in church and temple, and other children come to see two mommies as yet another norm. But it could also foster more puritanical and conformist values, as critics charge, and sap collective energies from other ongoing political and social battles, as well as ignoring the needs of the elderly gay, or of disenfranchised youth.

The way a society treats its gay families has broad implications for all families. Just

as we refuse to protect the family bonds of children because their parent(s) are gay, denying them equal access to health care or to inheritance or to appropriate custody arrangements, so too we punish children for other parental infractions, such as being born to a single mother on welfare or belonging to another group subject to social prejudice. Queer family discourse is not likely to disappear until we come to understand that, as one of us has argued elsewhere, 'all our families are queer'. Gay and lesbian families simply display with added intensity the characteristics of broader family and social realities today, helping to expose the dangerous disjunction between popular 'family values' rhetoric and the complex lived realities of contemporary families. Not the same as other families, nor an alternative to 'the family', lesbian families expose the social and historical character of every definition of family. Promoting queer family values within a multi-hued rainbow coalition to support all shapes and colors of families could establish family diversity itself as normal in a democracy.

#### EPILOGUE

Perhaps we might end by suggesting that newly emerging gay and lesbian family forms might better be compared not to plastic ducks but to the ugly duckling of the children's fairy-tale. Harched as if in prophetic anticipation of the current technological revolution in methods of reproduction as one of a brood of ducklings, one offspring quickly appears different from his nest-mates. Everyone who sees the ugly duckling considers him disturbingly queer 'Quack, Quack! Get out of town!' they derisively sing. But in time, the queer duckling quacks back, for to his own surprise and theirs he survives their taunts and emerges a magnificent swan, the pride of the pond. Not a duck at all, although the egg from which he came had been laid among their kind. And wouldn't it be dull if the only swans

our pond could sustain were identical little yellow plastic ducks?

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *The New Yorker*, 8 March, 1999, with reference to Leska Newman, 1991. *Heather Has Two Mommies*. Boston: Alyson Publications.

<sup>2</sup> In Utah, for example, Wardle drafted regulations limiting adoption and foster care placements to households in which all adults were related by blood or marriage (later passed by the state legislature), shortly after publishing his 1997 article impugning the methods, merits, and motives of social science research on lesbian and gay parenting.

<sup>3</sup> Note Steven Seidman's assertion that: "Lesbians and gay men of color have contested the notion of a unitary gay subject and the idea that the meaning and experience of being gay are socially uniform. Indeed, they argue that a discourse that abstracts a notion of gay identity from considerations of race and class is oppressive because it invariably implies a white, middle-class standpoint" (1993: 120). Valerie Lehr (1999) suggests that the fact that racial/ethnic identity is more likely to be central to self-definition for people of color in the USA may result in greater sexual freedom because of the consequently lessened need to embrace a fixed sexual identity. She further wonders, conversely, whether bisexuality is undercounted in white communities.

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## Part IV

# POLITICS