Chapter One

Why Do Research on Families?

To many people, doing research on families seems a waste of time. After all, we all have families, don't we? We know about families through our own experiences. Most surveys simply confirm what we already know, right? So why bother to do social research on families?

To really understand why we do social research, we have to recognize that curiosity is one of the most basic of human drives. Some biologists believe that the human brain is hardwired to solve challenges and answer questions. It's probably this drive that led the human species from learning

to light fires to landing on the moon within a few hundred generations. Humans seem to have an innate need to know why things happen the way they do. Albert Einstein reportedly said, "God does not play dice with the universe," meaning that we don't like to believe that events simply happen. We need or want to believe that events happen for reasons. Much human activity is centered on discovering these reasons, a major manifestation of which is the search for personal understanding—the need to know why things happen.

When we find ourselves in an ambiguous or unfamiliar setting, we often feel a need to impose some kind of structure to help us make sense of it. Answering the *why* question helps to impose that structure. We have an innate need to understand: why family sizes are declining, why some husbands abuse their wives, why children from certain types of families are more likely to use drugs, why some intimate relationships fail.

Humans have developed two systems—religion and science—to help them answer the *why* question. These two take very different approaches to knowledge. For religion, faith is the key. The true believer accepts religious teachings despite a lack of concrete, objective evidence. Faith allows us to accept as fact that Moses really did bring the Ten Commandments down from Mount Sinai, that Jesus really did rise from the dead, that Mohammed really was God's prophet.

Science, however, asks us to take little on faith. Science attempts to answer the *why* question by constructing and testing theories. The key test for any theory is whether the theory is supported by concrete, observable, replicable evidence.

I take the latter approach in this text. How does science help us to understand the world around us? Specifically, how can scientific research methods help us to understand families? Let us begin by discussing the stages of social research.

What Are the Stages of Social Research?

Exploration

A basic purpose of social and behavioral research is to find out what, exactly, is going on in society. At some point in any research study, we know little about the phenomenon in which we're interested, and we begin our **exploration.** Because we obviously need to start our research somewhere, we begin by casting a wide net in our search for explanations. We start out with a few ideas about what the phenomenon is or how it works. Perhaps we are curious about what factors are correlated with the birthrate or

whether the age at first marriage is increasing or decreasing; or we may need to find out what types of therapies work best for children from abusive households. We often won't have any specific ideas about what key issues we need to study. At this stage in the research process, library research is essential. Before beginning any research project, we need to find out what research has already been done on the topic and what is known (and, more important, what is unknown) about the phenomenon in question. Most of Chapter 3 is devoted to the methods of searching the literature.

Once we have a handle on the existing literature, we might begin our investigation by simple, unscientific observation—watching people going about their daily lives. These preliminary observations are often purely qualitative and interpretive in nature, but from them, we can begin to define the problem. What are the key processes and concepts that need to be understood? What aspects of behavior are important? What are the characteristics of the setting or the situation under study? What factor or factors seems to be related to the outcome?

Another way we might begin our research is to ask, in an unstructured way, a small number of people about their behavior. Let's say that we want to study how new parents make decisions about employment plans. We might begin by identifying a few couples—most likely friends or acquaintances—and talking to them informally about their own experiences. Did the couples have a plan for employment before their children arrived, or did they wait until after their children were born to decide who was going to work? What kinds of problems did they encounter in making these decisions? What factors did they consider to decide how much each parent would work outside the home? These discussions can sensitize us to issues we hadn't considered originally. Although this procedure won't produce the most representative sampling of responses, it should help sensitize us to the nature of the problem.

Description

Once we have established some parameters for our research, the next step typically is to formulate a **description** of the characteristics of some group of people or families. For example, the Census Bureau tells us that the average family size is 3.19 persons (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2010). In 2009, the U.S. teen birth rate fell to a historic low of 39.1 births per 1,000 women ages 15 to 19 (Ventura & Hamilton, 2011). African American women are about one third less likely to marry by age 30 than non-Hispanic white women (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). These descriptions, although informative, do not tell us *why* the differences or patterns exist; they merely assert the existence of the differences or patterns.

In this stage, we are concerned with identifying and labeling phenomena. A good parallel in the natural sciences is the taxonomic classification system of all living organisms into phyla, genera, species, and so forth. The classification system doesn't tell us anything about *why* living things fall into certain categories; it merely gives a useful structure in which to classify our specimens. Knowing that the house cat is a member of the genus *Felis* and the species *catus* doesn't tell us anything about why a cat is different from, say, a horse or a frog.

Another important process in this stage is that of **conceptualization,** which involves defining our terms at both the theoretical (abstract) and empirical (concrete) levels. Chapter 5 addresses the issues of conceptualization and measurement.

Explanation

Explanation is specifically concerned with answering the *why* question. Why do families headed by Asian Americans differ from those headed by Hispanics? Why do educational outcomes for children of employed mothers differ from those whose mothers are full-time housewives? Why are working-class parents more likely to use physical punishment than middle-class parents? Why does the division of household labor within families change over time? Here, we go beyond classification and description to explain the phenomena that we have observed.

This process is often the most complex, because meaningful explanations of social and behavioral phenomena require explicit and formal models that show why, of necessity, certain conditions bring about, or are associated with, particular outcomes. We call such a model a **theory.** A theory is a set of logically related statements that claims to explain why, given certain conditions, a specific outcome occurs. Once a theory is confirmed—when it has been shown to accurately account for the phenomena it's supposed to explain—we can then take the theory and use it to predict future outcomes and even to design **interventions** that use the theory's arguments to modify the world around us in a systematic way.

The explanation stage is really about theory construction and testing, a topic that is well beyond the scope of this text. Chafetz (1978) and Reynolds (1971) each present good introductory treatments of the topic.

Prediction

Although the idea of **prediction** seems pretty straightforward, it's important to distinguish between predictions, which are based on theory, and *forecasts* or *prophecies*. When the leading investment experts tell us what

the stock market is going to do over the next year, they are not typically basing their projections on some body of theory. Although they may be basing their forecast on current and past conditions, we must remember that the past does not predict the future. Teenage marriages aren't more likely to fail simply because they have been more likely to fail in the past. When we observe a particular pattern or relationship among variables repeatedly over time and across populations, it's likely that some real underlying cause produces the observed outcome or effect. There are sound theoretical reasons why teenage marriages have a higher likelihood of divorce, and a good theory should be able to tell us what those reasons are and even under what conditions teenage marriages might be as stable as other marriages.

To predict outcomes, we must know why they happen, which requires theoretical explanation. If we know why certain outcomes occur—that is, if we understand the underlying processes that lead to the outcome in question—we should be able to predict when the outcome will occur and when it will not.

Similarly, just noting that children from single-parent households have lower academic achievement than do other children is not, in and of itself, an explanation of why children from single-parent households do not perform as well in school. It may be that the real causal factor may be something that is related both to family structure and to academic achievement (for example, household income). Or the apparent association between family structure and academic achievement may be an anomalous pattern specific only to a particular set of data. The observed association may even be a methodological artifact resulting from flaws in the sampling, data collection, or measurement processes. Without theories to organize our thinking, any speculation about the underlying causes of specific family phenomena is just guesswork.

Intervention

Kurt Lewin said, "There is nothing so practical as a good theory" (Lewin, 1951, p. 169). If one is truly concerned with changing society, good theory is a necessity. Armed with a good theory, we can design and implement interventions designed to change the world around us. If we really understand why an outcome occurs, we have the knowledge (but not necessarily the resources or technology) to change that outcome. One reason why so many social programs—including those involving children and families—don't seem to work is that they aren't usually based on sound, theoretical knowledge of the process involved. If we have a good theory—one that tells why, of necessity, certain outcomes have to occur given certain conditions—then we should have the knowledge necessary to design effective interventions.

Let's consider a concrete example. A theory that might explain the likelihood of a child becoming delinquent depends in part on the amount of time parents spend with that child. If this theory is correct—that is, if the theory is confirmed with empirical evidence—programs that lead parents to be more involved with their children should result in reduced delinquency rates.

Evaluation

Once new programs and policies are in place, it's useful to know whether they really work. Do laws that require jail terms for wife abusers really reduce marital violence? Do stricter divorce laws reduce the rate of divorce? Do subsidies to support additional training of child care providers improve the quality of child care? Even though a theory may have strong confirming evidence to support it, sometimes our social programs—even those based on good theory—don't work. Maybe we didn't implement the program correctly, or maybe the theory is too specific and doesn't work in all situations. In any case, before allocating scarce resources, we need to know whether specific programs work. **Evaluation** of programs and policies tells us whether they are producing the desired types of outcomes or achieving established goals.

In the case of the delinquency project mentioned earlier, we would want to design a careful evaluation of the program's effects. Ideally, this evaluation would be built right into the program itself and not just conducted after the fact. A careful evaluation tells us whether the program really does increase parents' involvement with their children and whether this involvement really does result in decreased rates of delinquent behavior. Chapter 11 focuses on methods of evaluating social programs.

How Is Research on Families Different?

Although the fundamentals of research on families are similar to those of the more general methodologies found in sociology, political science, psychology, and anthropology, important differences exist. For additional discussion of these points, see Gelles (1978) or Larzelere and Klein (1987). The five major differences between research on families and social and behavioral research in general are the following:

1. Families are systems of individuals.
2. Defining the family is problematic.

3. Family members occupy multiple roles and statuses simultaneously.
4. Much family behavior is private and hidden.
5. We all have preconceptions about families and family life.

Families Are Systems of Individuals

Perhaps the most important difference between research on families and most other research lies in the primary focus of family research: families. In most behavioral and social-science research, the focus is on the individual. If we follow an individual over time, despite marriages, divorces, and job changes, we are still only dealing with a single, identifiable individual. In family research, however, our focus is usually on a *group*—a family—whose composition and characteristics change over time.

Consider a life-course study of a particular married couple. They probably form a family by marrying when both the wife and her husband are in their twenties. Within a few years, they may have children. The couple might divorce at some point, creating two residential groups where there had been only one. Following the divorce, one or both of the spouses might remarry and have children with a new spouse, creating a blended family or stepfamily. One spouse might pass away, leaving a widow or widower. Over time, the children mature and leave home, often to start their own families.

You can see the problem that studying this family presents to a researcher. The composition of the family is constantly changing, sometimes growing, sometimes shrinking. New members enter through the process of birth or marriage and then leave through death or divorce. How can we answer a question as simple as the size of this family when the size is changing over time?

A second problem created by the fact that the family is a system or group of individuals is the **unit of analysis.** Are we focusing on individuals or groups? Is our concern with the marital dyad, the nuclear family, or even the extended family? If we want to measure an individual's social class, then we typically look at the person's occupation, education, or income. On the other hand, how do we measure the social class of a family? Is it the husband's characteristics? Or is it the wife's? Do we somehow combine data for both spouses? What about household income for children of divorced parents? Do we count only the custodial parent's characteristics, or do we figure in the noncustodial parent's characteristics as well? Even if we decide to limit our analysis to couples (rather than families) we're still not off the hook. Maguire (1999) and Sayer and Klute (2005) present some of the methodological and analytic approaches to handling dyads (couples) as

the unit of analysis. We will return to the issue of unit of analysis in more detail in Chapter 2.

Defining Family

A fundamental problem in studying families is that we lack a generally agreed-upon definition of what exactly a family is. The U.S. Census Bureau defines a *family* as a group of two or more people (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together. This definition is unsatisfactory, however, because it excludes many groups that might reasonably be considered families. Are cohabiting couples families? What about gay and lesbian couples? Do foster parents and the children for whom they are responsible constitute families? What about groups living in a communal setting where child care is shared among unrelated adults? Under the U.S. Census Bureau's definition, some groups are considered families even though many observers might disagree. For example, should we define two elderly siblings who live together as a family? Are childless married couples families?

A 2003 national survey found that although nearly all respondents would define a married couple with children as a family, almost 80% also considered an unmarried heterosexual couple living together and raising children a family; over half defined two gay men or two lesbian women with children as families as well (Powell, Bolzendahl, Geist, & Steelman, 2010). Evidently, there are many possible definitions of family. This uncertainty about what constitutes a family causes major problems for researchers. Without a generally agreed-upon definition of family, how can researchers know who to study or exclude from their research? Gubrium and Holstein (1990) have discussed these issues in some detail.

Multiple Statuses and Multiple Roles

Gelles pointed out, "Families are made up of individuals occupying multiple statuses and enacting multiple roles" (1978, p. 408). Each member of a family is simultaneously a potential parent, sibling, employee, spouse, and son or daughter. When collecting data about a family member, be sensitive to responses that may depend on which roles and statuses an individual is occupying at the time of the interview. Interviewing adults in the presence of their children, for example, might produce vastly different results than we might obtain by interviewing the same adults in the presence of their own parents.

Backstage Behavior

Another problem in studying families is the fact that much of what goes on in families is what is known as *backstage behavior* (hidden from public view). Important behaviors such as child abuse, domestic violence, and child rearing are not generally visible to persons outside the family. Until recently, for example, the rate of domestic violence was widely believed to be relatively low. As better research produced higher quality data, social scientists realized that because incidents of domestic violence are often known only to members of the family and perhaps close friends, rates of such behavior can be grossly underestimated.

There is another problem related to this backstage behavior. "Families develop private, idiosyncratic norms and meanings about their own activities" (Larzelere & Klein, 1987, p. 135). Each family has its own patterns of, and rules for, behavior. Often, these are the result of years (or even generations) of living together. Think about your own family: Aren't there unwritten rules about who sits where at the dinner table or a pecking order for seats in the family car? Often, these rules are not shared with the outside world, and a researcher studying the family may not be privy to these secrets.

Families even have ways of restructuring the way they view themselves to fit these rules and expectations. In *The Second Shift,* Hochschild and Machung talk about "family myths" that are "versions of reality that obscure a family truth in order to manage a family tension" (1989, p. 19). One couple explained that they "shared" the housework by dividing the house into an upstairs and a downstairs. The wife was responsible for all the tasks associated with the upstairs, which included the kitchen, living areas, bedrooms, and bathrooms. The husband's downstairs responsibilities covered the garage and activities such as auto maintenance, yard work, and general household repairs.

In response to the interviewer's questioning, both husband and wife presented this housework "sharing" as an equitable solution to the division of household labor, even though an outside observer might think the arrangement was anything but fair or equitable. The public image that a family chooses to present to the outside world can be different from the private, internal image.

Preconceptions About the Family

Another problem that interferes with our ability to study families is that everyone is familiar with families; we all have ideas about what are right, good, or appropriate family behaviors and structures. If you study

invertebrate zoology, you are unlikely to have strong beliefs about worms and insects; when you sit down to study French philosophy, you probably don't have strong feelings one way or another about Voltaire or Descartes. That's not the case with the issues that family researchers study, however. We all have attitudes and beliefs about topics such as premarital sex, abortion, same-sex marriage, extramarital affairs, day care, corporal punishment, the employment of mothers of young children, and the allocation of household chores. It's difficult for us to study such phenomena without our own beliefs intruding into the analysis.

These preconceptions take at least three forms. First, our own backgrounds may *bias* us in favor of or against certain forms of family behavior. People whose own mothers were employed outside the home, for example, are more likely to approve of the employment of mothers of young children. Members of certain religious groups are more prone to oppose legalized abortion than are members of other groups. Political conservatives are more apt to emphasize the importance of the husband's dominance of the marriage relationship than are political liberals.

Second, our own experiences can serve as limits to what we know or understand. Most middle-class people have little contact with welfare recipients, for example, so they may not have much sympathy for, or understanding of, people who use and need the social welfare system. Christians in this country have relatively little firsthand experience with religious discrimination and may not be sensitive to the messages they send to non-Christians when they conduct religious pageants in public settings.

A third factor that leads to preconceptions about the family has to do with *ethnocentrism,* which is the belief that the ideas and practices of our own ethnicity, gender, or social class are somehow *the best* or *right.* Sociologists remind us that we need to be aware of the multiple and intersecting effects of race, social class, and gender. Most of the family phenomena we study differ by race—compare the family structures of white and African American families, for example. And family behavior varies by social class; one of the best known empirical generalizations in the study of child rearing is that the use of corporal punishment is highest among working-class families and lowest among upper-class families. We must also recognize that the family is a highly gendered environment. Much of what goes on in families varies by gender: Who does which tasks around the house, who cares for the children, who is the primary breadwinner, what are the educational and career expectations for the children, and so forth.

When we study families, we cannot simply ignore these preconceptions. We need to be aware that our own beliefs may affect the topics we choose to study and the methods we use to study those topics. As difficult as it is,

we need to take care to design our studies so that our biases don't influence the results or our interpretations of those results.

The Benefits of Well-Conducted Research

By this point, you have probably reached the conclusion that doing quality research on children and families is not an easy task. You're right; it's a lot of work to design and execute a research project that will yield solid, meaningful findings. And we are bombarded daily by the results of poor research. Do you really trust the results of a telephone opinion poll in which respondents have to pay 99 cents to give their opinions or a survey of likely voters run by a candidate's own campaign organization?

So, why is it important to do good research?

First, as we suggested in the beginning of this chapter, the familiarity of the family often makes it difficult to explain general family processes and theories to the lay public. When we talk about our research on families to groups outside the university, the audiences often react with, "Sure, I knew that." However, the fact that a particular research finding "makes sense" or is "obvious" does not make it any less important.

A second problem is that what seems obvious at first glance often isn't so obvious after all. A popular media device is to make fun of researchers who study behaviors and relationships that are obvious to everybody. However, that which is obvious is not always true. For example, it's obvious that older Americans are more likely to be victims of violent crime than are younger people, right? Older people are more vulnerable and easier targets for thieves. Yet exactly the opposite is true: Americans older than the age of 65 years are approximately one sixth as likely to be victims of violent crime as is the general population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2010).

Another obvious relationship is the effect of cohabitation experience on marital stability. It makes sense that those who have lived together before marriage should have a lower chance of divorce; presumably, cohabitants learn relationship skills that they can use to improve the quality of their marriages. However, this does not seem to be the case. Research suggests that (a) women who cohabited with their husbands before marriage were approximately 50% more likely than noncohabitants to have their marriages disrupted, and (b) those who cohabited with someone other than their eventual husbands were more than twice as likely to experience separation or divorce as those who didn't cohabit (Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991).

Complicating these issues is that some aspects of family life such as births, divorces, and marriages are easy to observe and measure, but others including child abuse, marital happiness, and family dynamics are difficult

to measure in any objective way. Sometimes, I like to think of the study of the family as a *hard science* because it's so much harder to do research on marriages, families, and children than it is to study electrons, microbes, or chemical reactions.

One crucial reason we need quality research on families is rooted in our motivation for choosing to study families. If you're like us, one of the reasons you're interested in studying families is because you'd like to bring about change. You might see neglected children and hope to place them in homes where they will get lots of love and attention. Or you might want to help unhappy married couples communicate with and respect each other. Perhaps you want to help abusive husbands deal constructively with their anger (or maybe you just want to lock them up and throw away the key). To accomplish these goals, you need the best, most objective information available—the kind of information you'll get from quality research.

Study Questions

1. Find and briefly describe examples of published research on families at each of the six stages of social research (exploration, description, explanation, prediction, intervention, and evaluation).
2. List as many of the roles and/or statuses that you occupy in life as you can. Give an example of one of these roles or statuses (for example, *employee* or *student*) that conflicts with a family-related role or status (for example, *spouse* or *parent*). How do you deal with or resolve this conflict?
3. Ask three friends or acquaintances to define *family*. Discuss the similarities and differences between their definitions. Give examples of groups that would be considered *families* under one or two of the definitions but not the other(s). How might these definitions affect the way one would do research on families?
4. Choose some aspect of families that interests you (for example, child well-being, division of household labor, marital stability, or fathers' involvement with children), and give three examples of how a researcher's preconceptions or personal opinions might affect the way that research is done on that topic.
5. From your own family, give an example of a *family myth*—something that is generally accepted to be real or true even though some or all of your family members know that it isn't. Why do you think your family has created this family myth?
6. Even though most people think older Americans are more likely to be victims of crime than younger people, research shows that this is untrue. Find a published study on a family-related topic that reports a finding that is contrary to the conventional wisdom. Why do you think that people accept this conventional *wisdom?*

For Further Reading

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