

A Sociology of Family Life: Change and Diversity in Intimate Relations

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‘A Sociology of Family Life: Change and Diversity in Intimate Relations’ is a book authored by Deborah Chambers and Pablo Gracia. This is the second edition, while the first edition was authored solely by Deborah Chambers and published in 2012.

This book analyses the growing diversity in family life involving the study of the intersections of gender, sexuality, social class, race and ethnicity along with the changes in family life. The book also studies changing families through a global lens. The chapters explore various themes such as alternative family arrangements, self fulfilment, individualization, the role of technology in the changing family patterns and even what has been referred to as the ‘detraditionalisation of intimacy.’ Chambers and Gracia explained this as intimacy and relationships now being more egalitarian, fluid and even short lived as compared to the past. The book also addresses changing parenting practices in contemporary society, for instance, more involvement of fathers in the caring and upbringing of the children in the family. Further, same sex couples and their challenges have also been discussed in the later chapters of the book.

The first chapter of the book traces the historical roots of family as a social institution. Family has been defined from a sociological perspective and there is a brief mention of F. Engels and his theory of how he relates family with the concept of private property. Further, the chapter discusses women's oppression and the traditional structure of the patriarchal family. However, the authors highlight how family gradually changed in 20th century, for instance, the emergence of ‘isolated nuclear family’ as given by Parsons. Towards the end of the first chapter, the rise of companionate marriages and its consequences have been discussed, such as egalitarianism, the deconstruction of gender roles and the emergence of more symmetrical families in the society.

In the second chapter, the focus is largely on individualisation and how it affects family life. Chambers and Gracia discuss the changing family structures for instance, the emergence of single parent families and living-apart-together families (LATs). The chapter also explores how such family structures are more appropriate to ‘avoid loneliness’ and how romance now is only a recreational activity. The chapter concludes with the concept of ‘families of choice’ and how living in a particular family structure is mostly the choice of the family members and not a necessity.

The third chapter of the book talks about parenting practices and the changes in the roles of parents in modern day society. Both parents are nowadays involved in household activities and it is not only the mother who is responsible for the domestic activities. The chapter also highlights mother's challenges as

a single parent or divorced parent, for instance, living with the stigma and other societal challenges. The father's perspective has also been talked about with reference to changes in their roles as well and how they share the responsibilities of the mother. Another segment of the chapter analyzes the issues faced by parents post divorce, such as their contact with their children and other psychological issues they face. Lastly, the chapter highlights the issue of domestic violence in families and how it affects the victims. The authors cited the 'stay at home policy' during the Covid period and how it was dangerous for domestic violence survivors.

In the fourth chapter, the changing nature of childhood has been examined. For example, enhanced rights of the children, their education and enhanced awareness of the parents towards their children have been discussed. The authors explore how children nowadays have more autonomy and families are becoming filo centric, i.e children centred. The chapter further analyzes the concept of 'stranger danger' and the unlimited social media access that is available to children. In modern day society, digital media has taken over outdoor recreational activities for children and their leisure time is mostly screen based. The authors have refereed to this phenomenon as 'living together but separately.' The chapter concludes with a discussion on privacy and personal space and how children in present day society demand privacy and their 'own' space in the family without the interference of the elders.

The fifth chapter of the book lays emphasis on families and ageing societies. The chapter analyzes how caring for grandparents in a fast paced lifestyle has become challenging at both the familial as well as the societal levels. For instance, the pension schemes are not well implemented and need reinforcement. The chapter also addresses the various issues faced by the elderly. Nowadays, mostly while the rest of the family is dispersed, the grandparents are at the disadvantage of having to navigate through most aspects of their lives by themselves. However, technology allows them to be in contact through video calls and 'Facetime.' Another aspect discussed in this chapter is how grandmothers are more involved in 'parenting' their grandchildren while the parents of the children are away for work. Lastly, the chapter highlights the rising number of unmarried adults nowadays and their own set of challenges, such as loneliness and other issues related to their health and well being.

In the sixth chapter, the book examines how globalization affects family life. Marriages are now no longer considered sacred and are instead more of a contract. Further, the chapter calls attention to the migration of single mothers for better jobs and the emergence of transnational families. Chambers and Gracia introduce a term 'care deficit', referring to the inability to take care of children and the elderly due to work and job demands and thus, how such migration affects parent-child relationships. A few significant consequences highlighted by the authors include an increase in delinquency and child suicide. The chapter concludes with a brief mention of how arranged marriages are used as a strategy to enhance a family's material resources in modern day society; and how arranged marriages also help families sustain their ethnic identities when they marry or settle in a foreign nation post marriage.

The seventh chapter explores the relationship between family planning policies and cultural values about having children. The authors provide brief case studies of Japan and Romania. There is a further discussion about India and how factors such as son preference and thoughts about girls as an economic liability influence parents' decisions about having a boy child. The chapter further examines illegal

practices carried out regarding having children such as selective abortion and pre-determination of the child's sex. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the consequences of the newly emergent medical technologies and a case study of China's one child policy.

The eighth chapter is an extension of the theme of the previous chapter and lays emphasis on new reproductive technologies in society. The authors talk about the assisting nature of the new reproductive technologies, such as the discovery of test tube babies through IVF (in vitro fertilization). The chapter also highlights the difference between the genetic mother whose genes are in the child and the real mother who actually raises and cares for the child. The chapter also introduces the concept of Donor Insemination (DI) which is referred to the insemination of a fertile woman with the sperm of a stranger. Chambers and Gracia further look at infertility from a global perspective. The chapter concludes with a debate on commercial surrogacy in India and the grave ethical issues associated with it.

The ninth and final chapter of the book looks at the politics of family, intimacy and personal life. The chapter reiterates the decline in traditional family values and talks about the rise of a global dimension to family life due to the emerging transnational families. The chapter also dives into the diversity in modern day intimate relationships and how intimacy connects with economic transactions more than being a sacred bond. The authors also address new intimacies such as the LGBTQIA+ community and how the society is responding to them. The chapter ends with a brief about the emergence of the concept of 'friends as family' wherein friends fulfill certain roles of the family without sharing blood or legal ties; and how this is also an extended social support network when the family members are unavailable or away.

Family relations are now undergoing dramatic changes, both globally and locally. This book has presented a comprehensive assessment and analysis of recent research on various topics of family, parenting, childhood, technologies and even interpersonal ties. While new kinds of intimate relationships such as 'friends as family' and LGBTQIA+ intimacies become commonplace, the book has analyzed challenges faced by parents in all walks of life, including staying at dispersed locations, issues post divorce, domestic violence and even problems with caring for the elderly. With a focus on significant social factors such as class, gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality, this book has also highlighted new material on cultural and digital transformations and how children depend on the 'screen' for leisure and recreation.

With a global aspect to every topic discussed and blending various theories with real-life examples, this book is insightful and engaging; and has successfully explored the sociological perspectives in every chapter.

Thus, this book features extensive updates and highlights on issues ranging from demography, migration, ageing and government policies to reproductive technologies, employment and care and is a very informative read for everyone interested in studying and exploring the sociology of family life.