
BOOK REVIEW

Leeder, E. (2004). *The family in global perspective: A gendered journey*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 307 pp. Paper ISBN: 0-7619-2837-5, \$39.95.

Elaine Leeder, Professor of Sociology and Dean of the School of Social Sciences at Sonoma State University, was inspired to write this textbook after two sessions of teaching students at round-the-globe Semester at Sea sessions. At ports of call around the world Leeder observed varieties of family life. Daughter of a Holocaust survivor who lost many family members, she determined “to educate readers about difference, about people who might be unlike ourselves...Not understanding others and not accepting difference lead to suffering on a daily basis...” (p. xv).

Having taken on a gargantuan task – to describe families the world over in historical and theoretical context – she has succeeded well. The book is especially well-suited to an undergraduate audience with little prior knowledge of social science concepts. Leeder goes out of her way to define and explain terminology that might be unfamiliar to the uninitiated. Because the topics discussed are so broad, supplementary materials are in order to dig deeper into specific subjects and countries in order to flesh out discussions in the text.

The author, who has published in the area of family violence, provides information based on studies in a variety of disciplines, including demography, history, and the social sciences. She includes her own informal observations and experiences, which she imparts in an engagingly personal style. Arranged by topic, the book begins with discussion of major macro-theories that explain family function and form worldwide, including world systems, dependency,

modernization, and post-colonial theories. The next chapter includes basic terms with which students of the family should be familiar, such as those pertaining to types of marriage, lineage, living arrangements (e.g., patrilocal and matrilocal), and basic functions of the family.

In the chapter on theories specific to the family, Leeder contrasts two frameworks that she holds up as competing perspectives – structural-functionalism as delineated by Talcott Parsons versus Marxist conflict theory, the latter implicitly and explicitly underpinning her view of why families look and function as they do around the world. A feminist zeitgeist, announced by the subtitle of the book, overlays this economically-based conflict perspective throughout the book.

The next chapters outline the history of the family in the US in terms of its response to industrialization, contrasting western countries' status as "core" states (in terms of Wallerstein's world systems theory), with the histories of "semiperiphery" and "periphery" states in Latin America, Africa, and Asia which provide the core with materials and labor. The central chapter on gender and the family includes discussions of the socialization of gender, institutional sexism, and power relations in the family. It documents the inferior status of women in developing countries around the world, including exploitation in the sex trade industry and victimization, topics discussed in greater detail in a final chapter on violence in the family. Other chapters concern stratification by race, class and ethnicity, intimate relations (love, marriage, and divorce), and intergenerational relationships.

The Family in Global Perspective provides a thoughtful introduction to family studies. It integrates and organizes a mass of material, encompassing theories that allow students to view families through a variety of lenses. Chapters, which are necessarily brief, could make good starting places for further exploration and debate. (The author raises important issues in the form

of questions for readers, but they are randomly placed in the text. Questions could have been more formalized and prominent in the design of the book.) The language is clear and unfamiliar terminology is explained. The author is transparent about her own missteps and experiences in strange places, which is endearing. There is discussion of alternate family forms, including gay and lesbian families, as well as topics that have been rarely treated elsewhere, such as family violence around the world.

So much material is covered in a relatively brief book that depth had to be sacrificed to breadth. Generalities about families abound, sometimes bordering on stereotype, necessitating supplementary resources for greater nuance. Reliance on one study to provide information on family functioning in a whole country is no doubt necessary when the literature is so sparse, but it does not encourage certainty, which the author acknowledges, using the phrase “seems to” often throughout the book. Theoretical chapters could have included more concrete examples. Black and white photos of families around the world by the author and colleagues add a welcome dimension, but the text as a whole could have benefited from more of Leeder’s first-person accounts of families she encountered on her travels and other real-life examples of specific families to illustrate abstractions. Finally, there might have been more careful editing for style, language, and spelling. (There is a spelling error in the very first line of chapter one).

On the whole, this book covers topics that have been too little explored systematically. It opens the door to the world of families, suggesting ways of looking at differences and similarities that may be eye-opening to students, and invites discussion and debate. The book is generous and open-minded, paying attention to subjects that others have shied away from. As the author cogently states in the introduction, “The Internet, transnational corporations, and a new

global culture are upon us, and we need to understand them and how they impact one of the most private and yet public institutions, the family” (p. xvi).

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