

== Chapter 1 ==

Family Counts

FAMILY counts. That is, a family counts for its members and for its inextricable ties to other institutions. It counts for society at large because it represents a major conduit through which cultural knowledge flows from one generation to the next and beyond, and because it is a means by which necessary goods are distributed to members of society. Family and society are so interwoven that arguably, without family, we would have no society. Virtually all socialization theories see familial influence as pivotal from childhood to adulthood. Inequality also has deep roots within family. Scholars representing diverse theoretical leanings agree that family confers advantages and disadvantages that are difficult to erase (Becker 1980; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Coleman 1988; Featherman and Hauser 1978). In addition, family is the group that people often turn to in moments of triumph and moments of failure. An abundant literature dating back at least to the sociologist Émile Durkheim (1897/1977) contends that family is a primary institution into which people feel socially integrated and that this connectedness is consequential for the well-being of family members and the well-being of society.

Although we should be careful not to valorize family reflexively, we cannot deny the major role that family plays in fulfilling objectives that range from sheer survival to personal well-being—or the failure to do so. The appreciation of family as a societal cornerstone is one reason why the academic and public debate over “family decline” or “family change” is so spirited and controversial. The numerous realms in which it matters make the study of family a genuinely interdisciplinary arena. Scholars who study it come from the arts and humanities, public health, psychology, anthropology, political science, economics, communication, sociology, evolutionary sciences, and beyond. The scholarship across disciplines on the impact of family underscores its relevance in virtually every corner of social life. In other words, family counts.

There is another way in which “family” counts: what we collectively