

Family, Self, and Society: Toward a New Agenda for Family (Book Review)

By: Mark A. Fine

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Abstract:

Family, Self, and Society: Toward a New Agenda for Family Research. Philip A. Cowan, Dorothy Field, Donald A. Hansen, Arlene Skolnick, & Guy E. Swanson (Eds.). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. 1993. 502 pp. Hardcover ISBN 0-8058-0999-6. \$89.95.

This edited book represents the efforts of an interdisciplinary group of family scientists to consider the current state of family theory and research and to suggest future directions. The book contains four parts, which focus on conceptual models, research on children and nuclear families, research on older adults and their families, and the use of case studies, respectively. A concluding chapter by the editors describes issues that should be addressed in formulating a research agenda for the next decade.

Keywords: book reviews | marriage | family | family science | family theory | nuclear families | older adults | children

Article:

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The interdisciplinary and diverse collection of scholars is both a strength and weakness of the book. This characteristic is a strength in that a wide array of perspectives, issues, and

methodologies are represented. This diversity, for example, is represented in chapters on the history of families (Skolnick), on Japanese families (De Vos), on how children actively influence their environment (Hansen), on how gender influences parenting behavior (Cowan, Cowan, & Kerig), how parental conflict and divorce affect children (Johnston), family relations of the "oldest" old (Johnson), and a psychoanalytic analysis of parent-infant interaction (Settlage, Silver, Afterman, Hart, & Nelson).

Unfortunately, this diversity also represents a weakness in that the chapters, as well as the different parts of the book, are not well integrated. Although each part of the book has one or two concluding chapters that attempt to integrate the component chapters, it was very difficult to determine how one chapter related to another within a section, or how the different parts of the book contributed to an integrated whole. This is often the case with edited volumes, and the editors should be given credit for recognizing the need to have a concluding chapter at the end of each part of the book.

Despite this weakness, the book contains a wealth of thought-provoking theoretical notions and empirical findings. Perhaps because of my primary affiliation as a researcher, I found the empirical chapters in the second part of the book to be particularly useful and interesting. The high-light was a comprehensive and thoughtful chapter by Cowan, Cowan, and Kerig that reports the results from their *Becoming A Family* longitudinal study. Although I am not an enthusiastic advocate of case studies, some that are presented in this book, and particularly the integrative chapter by Chodorow, illustrate the best that this approach has to offer.

The concluding chapter emphasizes that future research and theory needs to modify our definitions of what families are, to provide general (e.g., traditional quantitative studies) and specific (e.g., case studies) information about families, to consider the role of gender in shaping the quality of family life, to recognize multiple methods of studying families, to explore further the mechanisms that link families to other social systems, and to recognize the values that underlie our study of families.

This book would be primarily useful to family scholars who are interested in somewhat abstract and global theoretical and empirical analyses of families. Some understanding of sociological theories of family life, particularly that of Parsons, would be especially helpful.