

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

J. ROSS ESHLEMAN and SUSANNAH J. WILSON, *The Family*. Toronto: Pearson Education. 2001, x + 383p., Index, \$43.95 paper.

Eshleman and Wilson's *Family* stems from an older text that originated in a structural functionalist approach, but since has been much revised. Though the advertising material claims that selected theories and frameworks are used throughout this remains basically structural functionalism. The text recognizes a variety of family forms and although there is agreement that families are under stress in several ways there seems to be consensus that they will survive as a form. However, what form that will be is certainly up for debate. Included in Eshleman are families that vary by ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation, but it is still the sexual couple that is the focus, often the heterosexual couple, and mostly the younger one. Thus, the subtleties of family attendant on the relationships that manage care on a day to day basis can be lost in oversimplifications such as household and family. The text needs some extra care in discussing now given the major social shifts and transformations in today's family forms. There are changing mores resulting from complications such as those inherent in a rotating joint custody arrangement.

The wider society's new culture of individualism results in stresses for the family. Sociology texts in general are sorely in need of a deconstruction of "romantic love," whether it is accepted or not as the core glue of the marital tie. Thus, it is a first requirement to tackle such cultural notions. Otherwise these ideas are not deconstructed by the student. We need to understand how such notions work and what the power dynamics are. This insight is missing in Eshleman and Wilson. The text can also use insights from social psychology to provide an understanding of the drive for personal fulfillment in relationships.

Although the authors cover divorce as central to family experience, they deal with divorce mainly from the macro perspective, emphasizing its legal aspects. In my opinion there is inadequate attention to either the causes or effects of divorce, and further there are problems with subsuming remarriage and step-families under the topic of divorce. A chapter devoted to step-families alone as a dominant form would overcome the problem of treating them as only a small section in a chapter on divorce. There is no adequate coverage of the blended family and grandparent relationships—especially relationships between adults and aging parents. While Eshleman and Wilson have a chapter on commitment covering conjugal relations as

well as marital quality, it would have been helpful to have a deeper analysis of the axis of power. The textbook mentions children, but only as part of the family, not as actors in and of themselves.

Eshleman and Wilson do emphasize theory as their introduction to the field, and this up-front analysis of the variety of theories is useful in the analysis of family in the past—from Parsonian functionalism to conflict theory and thence to feminism. The reader will find a discussion on how research on family is actually done, including the relationship between theory and research.

Eshleman and Wilson use a static (synchronic) approach which is inadequate for an analysis of change and conflict that later approaches such as feminism and conflict theory can address. I regret the lack of the integration of some of the feminist agendas, such as the concern with families centred around women and a deconstruction the Western conception of family based as it is on romantic, companionate marriage. Also lacking are analyses of the capitalist system in which the family exists, how it acts as a social control over women, and, the sex/gender system that underlies everyday life and actions. The basis of unequal access to resources is not politicized in the text and thus an understanding of many of the tensions in family (for example, as expressed in the divorce rate) cannot be solely understood within the book's frame of reference. This overall lack of an analysis of power (for example, in the economic effects of divorce) weakens the text. Unless the authors provide more analytic weight, I believe such economic realities can be passed over superficially with insufficient understanding.

If your emphasis is on theory and a macro approach and your course focus is the younger sexual couple and the traditional family then Eshleman and Wilson will suit your approach. The textbook treats the major aspects of family to an in-depth study from broader sociological themes that is well organized and understandable. This is a well-cited text using research to illustrate points that are basic though unimaginative—a non-political staple of family-studies courses.

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