Chapter 1: The Changing Family

The timing on this chapter was appropriate since there has been so much attention in the wake of the same-sex marriage controversy lately regarding the meaning of marriage and whether it is dependent on childbearing and childrearing for its fundamental definition. It appears from reading the chapter and just from personal observation that the debate was both over-heated and conducted way past the point of usefulness. Marriage, and the meaning of family, has probably always been much more inclusive than we tend to think. Different cultures, and the same cultures over time, have simply assigned different values.

I found the discussion on the impact of technology especially interesting and tend to look at it in a positive light. The technology of food production, and the printing press, and the Industrial Revolution, and birth control, and an assortment of other technological changes all greatly impacted families and now we are simply faced with more choices and concerns. That does not seem likely to change at any time soon.

I do look at the comments and discussion on unconditional love as part of the emotional support structure of the family and wonder how many people achieve that ideal or worry too much because their families seem less than perfect as support systems. This is similar to the various myths regarding the family – how it "used" to be better, or how one kind is superior to another kind. This is one of the cases where media coverage of friendships and family relationships probably has a big impact, both for and against the idea of happy , functional families.

Chapter 2: Studying the Family

I found the methodology section interesting especially in regard to how the structure of a study (or of a survey question) so deeply impacts the outcome. Also interesting was how social desirability bias must be accounted for since people have a tendency to respond to surveys or other question mechanisms in a way that they think will be looked on favorably by others.

For the various types of theories, I am glad that we are going to use the Family Systems Approach in our papers. The family systems perspective considers that individuals can best be understood by an assessment of all the interactions within the entire family, never in isolation. The ecological perspective looks at how individual and/or family processes are influenced by the various environmental systems in which they operate. The structural-functional perspective looks at the function of family in society and how the balance of power between and among functioning institutions like the family, religion, education, and the economy balance social needs and therefore individual needs at the same time. Socialization determines most behavior and maintains the greater society. Conflict perspective looks at the family as a unit in which the power struggle is ongoing, and views the family as a vehicle that maintains social and gender inequalities in society. In the symbolic interaction perspective, couples and other family members share (or do not share) an understanding of their situation and these shared understandings, like of romantic love, impact the relationships.

I understand these various theories just to be approaches to understanding, and perhaps helping, families because I think the "truth" of families is probably a mixture of all of the above.

Chapter 3: The Family in Historical Perspective

I found this chapter interesting. I had previously read about medieval families and how differently the concept of family was viewed.

I think I had a limited understanding, or had believed the stereotypes I had seen portrayed in movies, about slave families. I had a better understanding of the diversity of Native American practices and some decent understanding of the devastating effects of the Europeans on the native cultures. Mexican Americans are under such fire now politically, so it was of interest to read about their history of strong, cohesive families under threat of economic exploitation and abuse.

The myth of the "golden fifties" continues to resonate, no matter how many times it is debunked. It was what was wanted by so many after the turmoil of the Great Depression and World War II. It has been perpetuated not just in fond but biased memories of older people but in television and movies to this day.

I liked the expression of cult of true womanhood. I think there are still cultish images surrounding the expectations of how men, women, and children are supposed to think and be.

Chapter 4: Racial and Ethnic Families – Strengths and Stresses

It was disheartening to see how little has changed for some of these groups since the discussion of them historically. Too many of the individual families still face poverty and the ongoing problems of a history of being overlooked and over-used.

I found the distinction between acculturation and assimilation important. Assimilation seems to me to mean bringing "others" into conformity with the prevailing attitudes and characteristics, not just allowing them to adjust to them. Acculturation is the process of the individual or group borrowing from or modifying another culture in order to adjust and adapt.

It is a little disturbing that we still continue to talk so much about distinct groups even in times of growing transculturalism. It seems in one sense like a step backward and that it would be better to be able to celebrate individual differences, which reflect heritage, without concentrating so much on ethnicity. Perhaps it will be necessary for a long time though or perhaps it is just a useful means of defining and time-saving.

Upward mobility for all social classes, with equal opportunities across age, and sex, and gender, and ethnic/racial lines seems a bit utopian sometimes, but possible. I think economic freedom is the key to freer social conditions, rather than the other way around, but I know not everyone agrees with that.

Chapter 5: Gender Roles and Socialization

The question was asked as to whether our society will ever accept working mothers and stay-at-home dads. I have known a couple of full-time, stay at home dads who have done that for years and years. It will become more common as wages equalize between men and women or as there are more same-sex partnered families, but in truth, there are not that many families left that have the luxury of one full-time stay at home parent, mom or dad.

The segments on nurturing and/learning teaching gender roles made me think of some recent news reports of parents who are attempting to raise children without any gender stereotyping at all, but not just in the sense of not accepting limitations or constraints. These parents are simply choosing not to advise their child as to whether he or she is male or female. This goes beyond gender stereotyping to a confusing kind of loss of sexual identity in my opinion. This choice by the parents was not in response to the birth of a child with mixed sexuality so that the child could later decide. Nor was it a choice based on behavior of the child that seemed to blur or cross gender identity. It was just a preemptive choice which seems wrong to me. I know there are societies where the boys and girls are treated more equally than they are in the US, but they are certainly not kept from knowing that there are biological differences. This secrecy seems like an unethical experiment to inflict on a child just for the social theories of the parents.

Chapter 8: Choosing Others – Dating and Mate Selection

From my understanding of the "old days" there used to be a fairly limited number of potential mates for any one person to choose from – and most people seemed to find someone. The limit was not just for social reasons but for geographic and time limitation reasons. Internet connectivity and a more transitory lifestyle has pretty much done away with that. Now it seems that with a nearly unlimited set of potential mates – if not worldwide, at least countrywide – people seem to think that they will be able to find the one perfect mate. Where they might have compromised in their dating standards and been pleasantly surprised in the past, now it is not unusual to hear people say they won't even date someone unless he or she is pre-qualified, like for a mortgage or other big loan. I believe, of course, that making a commitment to a marriage or family is tremendously important and one wants to achieve as much compatability as possible, but I believe it is important to satisfice when it comes to meeting new friends and potential dating partners. In addition to allowing for a great deal more fun, it enables one to experience more of what one really wants and needs in a relationship. The same thing is true of the occasional break-up, unhappy as it may seem at the time. They can definitely be healthy and life-affirming. They can show you what you *don't* miss, which is sometimes very important to know.

For choice of my partner, I expect it to be made as a search for an equal partner, looking for satisfaction and intimacy. I think entertainment I can provide for myself, and social interaction is also available through work colleagues and community activities.

Chapter 9 – Singlehood, Cohabitation, Civil Unions, and other Nonmarital Options

It is interesting to me that same-sex couples have fought so fiercely for the right to marriage at the same time that heterosexual couples seem to be considering it less important. It was always a somewhat awkward question for me when I was asked if I supported "gay marriage." Of course, there was no reason that these individuals should not have full legal equality with everyone else, but I sincerely questioned the motives of those who were defending the institution of traditional marriage so vociferously while it seemed that so many of them were engaged in terrible marriages. Also, while I believed that church approval of marriage was important to many people, although not to me, I did not understand why the government was so heavily regulating marriage anyway. It seems to me that people should be able to contract with whoever they want and call it family or anything else. For instance, single people should be able to choose someone other than an official partner to have as their health proxy or to enter into loans with or to leave their money to or any other legal activity.

I would not be surprised to see more group living arrangements coming into play. It is an effective way, among the right individuals, to share expenses and duties and hopefully, a joyous household. There will be less social stigma attached to it in the not too distant future. I think there will be more communal type housing arrangements as well, where single people will be able to retain their independence and privacy but will have many of the advantages of a group situation.

Chapter 10 – Marriage and Communication in Intimate Relationship

I have seen so few marriages in my life that I would want to emulate, a few perhaps but that just seems to have been luck on their part that they found a strong working partner that they also had fun with. I responded about same-sex marriages in the other chapter, but my thought process remains the same. At the same time that traditional marriage seems to be failing, an entire group was fighting for the right to join in. It is possible that this may provide new lifeblood and marriage as a long-term commitment may make a comeback.

I personally think people should be able to enter into short-term marriage contracts, easily renewable and easily dissolved. They would provide legal protection (and legitimacy though that is less important nowadays) to any children born of the marriage, and to each of the spouses during the term. The people could even decide whether their union was monogamous or not. A very few might want to enter into more permanent, covenant type marriages because of their religious or spiritual beliefs.

Reading the passages on the need for effective communication was probably the most uncomfortable of any of the chapters because I hate to be forced to "Communicate" with a capital C. My partner and I do not fight, we are open and loving, we share remarkably similar values and tastes, but sometimes I just am in a mood and cannot define it. That is not a refusal to define it, it is a lack of understanding on my part added to the feeling that it will just pass if left alone. My partner believes that anything not said might fester and that there is not going to be any negative judgment, so why hide. I appreciate the concept of privacy more, even when it is nothing really important being kept apart.

Chapter 11: To be or not to be a parent – More Choices, More Constraints

I am pleased that there is less stigma to the choice to remain childless, knowing it is just not right for some people and they shouldn't feel compelled to partake in parenthood as if it is an obligatory rite of passage – unfortunately, little people get affected by that. I applaud most of the technologies and social mechanisms that allow people who would not otherwise be able to have children arrange to have them. I am concerned about the artificial pushing back of the age to have children as a growing trend, and by this I mean menopausal and post-menopausal women, not just the couples who wait until their 30s or even early 40s. I think that children deserve as much as possible to have parents for an extended timespan and this just cuts into that. It also adds to what is already a growing burden for adult children to be sandwiched between caring for their own children and caring for their aged parents.

I certainly can't say I am "pro" abortion. That just sounds ludicrous, like saying you are "for" emergency surgeries. It is sad to me that it remains a necessary procedure, when there are so many effective means of contraception that are just not being used. Nonetheless, I support its availability, without stigma.

The costs of child-rearing are rather staggering, especially when you include in the stress on personal lives and marriages. I would really like to see the day when all the children born are wanted and are coming into homes that are emotionally and financially prepared to care for them.

Chapter 12: Raising Children – Promises and Pitfalls

I found the discussion of maternal gatekeeping interesting and valid. I don't doubt that instances of it abound. It reminded me, though, of the other side of gender relations where women were kept out of the arena of men, often not with discriminatory intentions, but simply by overlooking the many obstacles that were casually placed in the way as part of social and wor interactions.

I am concerned about the growing medicalization of much of our lives, not just of children. It is part of a growing emphasis on experts, rather than personal responsibility, and a continuation of the "fix it at all costs" mentality that some Americans seem to have.

I am not sure that there is one developmental model that I would choose, to the exclusion of the others. Mead is appealing in positing that the self only develops within some social interaction, however, it also seems apparent that Piaget's cognitive framework is at work as are Erikson's stages of emotional development. I am not sure that picking and choosing is appropriate with these theories, but human growth and development seems to large and potentially too chaotic to be pinned down so severely.

The chapter and discussion seem to lean heavily toward the pitfalls, and I think that is appropriate. A child should be a wanted addition to a home where the responsibility of parenthood is understood and welcomed.

Chapter 13 – Balancing Work and Family Life

I found the discussion on poverty interesting, "real" poverty versus relative poverty. I am well acquainted with a family – I used to go to daycare in their home – where the mother honestly feels they are impoverished in some way because they are less affluent than some of the families they associate with. This is a household with many, many advantages and with a terrible habit of wastefulness. Both partners work hard and they are able to provide a lifestyle that would make many Americans envious, not to mention impoverished people in other countries. Yet they feel that their hard work should entitle them to more, what they have is just never good enough.

I had never heard the phrase glass escalator before, but having heard it, I recognize its validity.

I was often taken "to work" by my parents when I was little, and they had very different types of jobs. I also was used to seeing parents work from home and began to understand some of the difficulties of maintaining a work perspective while working barefoot in your pajamas with cartoons and squabbling children in the background. My mother continues to telecommute (with no children in the background) close to full time after losing her long-time job to the economic downturn and offshoring.

I think I have acquired a fairly healthy attitude toward work and money, and this will impact how I balance work and family if I choose to have children later.

Chapter 14 – Family Abuse, Violence, and Other Health Issues

This was a difficult chapter to read, although there is no escaping hearing about such issues from the news accounts. I think what the chapter made clear though is how much abuse is probably not reported, or even thought of much, and some of the reasons that this is so. Learning about polyvictimization was especially disheartening and I can see why children victimized like this would be especially prone, later as adults, to somehow blame themselves even though this is so far from true.

Even though there seems to be some high profile case of domestic violence being reported all the time now, I think in many ways they muddy the waters rather than make the issue more concerning to people. There seems to be an increased tendency to excuse the perpetrator based on, for instance, his sport, and brand the victim's motivation for staying as financial or prestige. Both of those assessments are just part of the truer, more complicated picture as some of the information in this chapter points out.

It was interesting to me to see tobacco use, obesity, eating disorders, etc. linked together with violence. I wasn't sure I was comfortable with that even though it seems helpful to put a health lens on violence rather than just a criminal lens. I do know that these issues can have a huge impact on other family members, essentially inflicting the behavior upon them, so perhaps it is fitting that they share a chapter.

Chapter 15 – Separation and Divorce

It appears mine may be the first successful marriage in either of our families, so some people were surprised when we made the decision to marry rather than just live together, but it seemed and seems right for us. This is especially true since we did not "have" to get married with a child on the way or to get away from home or any of the other less positive reasons for choosing to marry.

Most of my friends growing up were either the children of divorce or the children of parents who should have divorced, and just didn't for probably complicated reasons. I endured a lot of turmoil in the household because of the effects of my parents' divorce, but I did not have a lot of emotional turmoil because of it. I think things would have been far worse if these two people I loved so much had been together hurting and ultimately probably hating each other. I am possibly simply luckier than most.

I had a stepmother too, plus half-siblings from my father's first marriage, so had to experience the awkwardness of families that didn't blend especially smoothly, but that was as much because my father was a very difficult man as any social pressure on blending the families.

It will be interesting to see the impact on divorce of the recent focus on marriage with the same-sex marriage debate and of the increased mixing of races and ethnicities in families. Perhaps when people choose to marry as simply one of many attractive options, they will be more committed to it than they are now when so many people just stumble into it by default.

As marriage in general declines, I suppose that remarriage will have to as well. As I responded in the section on divorce and some other sections, most everyone in my family has been married more than once – my grandfather and an uncle were each married five times! – and blended families of some sort have been the norm until my own generation where I plan to stay married, or else I would not have chosen to get married.

This will be an area of family relations that will be improved by society's recognition of more and more viable family styles. Hopefully, fewer people will feel compelled to remarry as their only way of finding financial security, and will be able to choose to make new blended families only out of a feeling of love and concern for all involved. Lifestyles that allow single-parent households to join together for financial stability and help with childcare are also becoming more of an option.

I suppose the theme that I have revisited throughout the course is that responsible choice matters. It is sad to marry or remarry out of a lack of other options. When pregnancies are wanted, this cuts down on "forced" marriages; when teenagers are educated about the real world costs of life and childrearing, they will be less likely to enter into too-early marriage; when adults are not stigmatized for making unconventional lifestyle choices, they will be less likely to fall into unhappy marriages. I really want, I suppose, for marriage (and remarriage when appropriate) to be a happy, life-affirming and health-enabling choice.

Chapter 17 – Families in Later Life

There are so many areas that can be covered by the umbrella of families in later life. For one thing, many women are choosing to have children much later in their live and can now even through technological interventions choose to give birth past the standard window for reproduction. Mothers and fathers can then be much older than traditional for their own children who are likely to lose them at a much earlier age than typical. This affects parenting styles and means that there are not likely to be grandparents for very long periods of a child's life.

On the other hand, many grandparents are already called in to take over primary caregiving rather than just one of the more traditional styles of grandparenting. This may be due to illness or death, incarceration, or abandonment.

Also an ever increasing concern is the sandwiching of adult children who must care both for their aging parents or even grandparents at the same time they are caring for their own children. This places tremendous pressures economically and emotionally on families although it can, of course, at the same time offer certain advantages for creating cohesive, multi-generational households.

Whenever you think about later life it is necessary to think about end of life and death. In my family, we have already discussed all these options and completed an advance directive for my mother. Every adult should clearly set forth his or her wishes regarding medical decisions, end of life care, and final wishes for burial, cremation, and related choices. If there are dependents, it is also imperative to provide adequate life insurance. I personally have some familiarity with hospice care and am very supportive of the movement toward less distancing of death from families, taking it out of the hospitals and closer to families so that they may make their peace in their own ways without mandatory medical intervention.

Chapter 18 – The Family in the 21st Century

The family in this century will be more and more about individual choice, with less social stigma attached to remaining single, remaining committed but childless, becoming a single parent, or choosing some other form of household and family style.

There seems to be increasing concern for child welfare in society and that is both appropriate and necessary. However, I am somewhat troubled by government or experts or even the folks next door over-reaching themselves with their ideas of what is best and imposing it on people who would be perfectly happy and safe if left to their own devices. I believe in personal responsibility for the consequences of the choices one makes.

It seems obvious that the family of even a few years from now will be much less rigidly defined. Same-sex parents and people who choose to identify as transsexual or gender neutral will be pioneers in creating new family styles. Additionally, racial and ethnic divides are likely to continue to blur. Hopefully, many economic and educational divides will blur as well. Individual growth within safe, respectful, and nurturing communities will become a priority.

Technology will be an ever-growing influence on health and longevity, lifestyle choices, and communication. This will impact almost every individual, primarily for the good, but it will present some new ethical dilemmas as technological change always does.

I believe families will be more inclusive of "extra" members who are simply invited in by choice, not by exclusivity of birth or marriage, and I think this is a good thing. This will be an advantage for emotional support for all and for teaching the next generation of children.