About the Author


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This article grew out of Mark’s personal experience as the son of immigrant parents. It is a version of a longer paper, “Immigration History as Family History: Utilizing Family Histories as a Teaching Technique,” in The Teaching of History: Ellis Island and American Immigration, edited by Virginia Yans McLaughlin (Rutgers, 1985).
Family History, Writing, and the Teaching of Sociology

Mark Hutter

Profile of the Students

At Glassboro State College, Sociology of the Family is a lower-level introductory course. There are no sociology prerequisites. The average class has about thirty-five students, the majority of whom have had little exposure to sociology. Most of these students are freshmen and sophomores. However, there are always some students, about twenty percent, who are juniors or seniors. These students have taken sociology courses as well as other courses in the social sciences and in history.

There are some variations in the social backgrounds of the students who take my course. At the main Glassboro campus, the majority are the first members of their families to attend college. Their families are from the working and middle class. Students represent many white, ethnic, Catholic groups of both the “new immigration,” mostly Polish and Italian, and the “old immigration,” mostly Irish and German. A significant number of the students are Black, with a smaller number of Hispanics, chiefly of Puerto Rican origin.

The Camden Campus of Glassboro State has a student population nearly half Black and half Hispanic (Puerto Rican). Most of them come from the working classes, are generally
older than students at the main campus, and are attending college on a part-time basis.

While the student populations on the Glassboro and Camden campuses are somewhat diverse, I give the same class project assignment in all my Sociology of the Family courses. That assignment is for students to do family histories.

**Advantages of Family History**

There are several advantages in having students do a family history project. The family history projects motivate and appeal to a broad range of students. Some who take the family course have various personal interests in the subject matter; many are not "into" sociology as are the majors. I find that the project also serves as a facilitator for classroom discussions. The somewhat abstract discussions of family structures, dynamics and processes take on a more personal meaning when students can relate them to their own family histories. For example, the student who knows that her Italian grandmother worked at home as a piece-goods textile worker can really appreciate the economic role of the Italian wife in supporting the family during the turn-of-the-century immigration years. And, by discussing her grandmother's story in the classroom, the student makes an important contribution.

Family history provides insights into historical events and gives them personal meaning as well. Thus, for example, the historical importance of Ellis Island as an immigration processing center gains a personal poignancy if one can interview family members who actually experienced being on a boat that entered New York City's harbor, and who viewed the symbol of America, the Statue of Liberty, for the first time. I felt deep emotion, for example, when I interviewed my father, who was processed at Ellis Island at the age of ten in 1920. Further, by "creating" documents of this kind, the student can learn about and question historical evidence.

There are two key elements in assigning a classroom family history project. First of all, it makes the student an active rather than a passive participant in the study of the family. Second, the
research is conducted outside the academic setting. Students’ homes and larger communities provide a corrective to the more abstract and theoretical materials found in textbooks. It brings the course subject “home” in a way that the classroom cannot.

By examining the family within the context of the local community, the student can better understand the relationship among events, behavior, and values and attitudes. Students can apply this biographical knowledge of family to larger state, national and global historical issues. C. Wright Mills, in his highly influential book, *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), says that the sociological imagination embodies the primary lesson of the social sciences: “the idea that the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period, that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all the individuals in his circumstances” (1959:8).

The sociological imagination allows the individual to see the inextricable linkage between “personal troubles” and “public issues.” That is, the values cherished by individuals—and felt to be threatened—are related to the values cherished by the larger population, that are also felt to be threatened. Mills emphasizes how personal concerns are often caused by structural changes in personal environment. It is required that one looks beyond these concerns toward structural changes in societal institutions. Mills uses marriage as an example. While a given marriage between a man and a woman may experience personal troubles, the high divorce rate in the society may indicate an underlying structural issue having to do with the institution of marriage and the family and of other institutions that impact upon them. The sociological imagination—and I suspect historians would recognize it too—brings one to an awareness of social structure, of the linkages among a great variety of settings. In my opinion, the use of family history by students may be one technique to sharpen and develop the student’s sociological imagination. Later in this discussion, I will apply family history to the study of one topic in the field of family—immigrant ethnic history.
History of the Family and Family History

When I begin the discussion of family history as a term project, I inform the students of the difference between the history of the family and family history. The history of the family refers to the social/historical investigation of family structures and patterns. It includes within its scope the disciplines of demography, history and sociology. On the other hand, I refer to family history in a more particular manner. Family history is the story regarding the life of a given family over several generations. In class, I talk about family history within the context of students’ investigating their own family backgrounds.

The concern I wish to encourage is with the historical dimension of family change within the broader context of societal change. The concern is with the social/historical articulation of such sociological themes as marital and familial gender roles and generational relationships in a given family’s history. I am concerned with such historical events as industrialization, urbanization, immigration, economic depression, recession and recovery, wars, and other forms of social disruptions as they impact on the experiences of individuals in families. For example, I suggest an investigation of the impact on the family of the movement to suburban New Jersey communities from such cities as New York, Philadelphia, Camden, and Newark. This family history can then be tied to the curriculum unit on urbanization and suburbanization and the family.

While the course is concerned with changes within the family system itself, the impact of changes through marriages, births, and deaths, I impress upon the students that family history is not genealogy. A family history is much more than a genealogical chart of names and dates. Genealogy is primarily concerned with the cataloguing of biological lineal descent of family generations. A family history may build upon the information found in genealogical charts, but it moves beyond genealogical concerns, placing a family into a broader context and revealing social and historical information about members.

The family historian strives for a broader and more rewarding understanding of family life in the past and of the family relations
with the outside world. It can include discussions on family job history, household structures and living arrangements, major problems, struggles and adaptations to those problems, social, religious, ethnic, and educational activities, and social class experiences. To adequately answer questions generated by these and other discussions, family history relies less on genealogy than on information gathered by interviewing family members, by searching for family records such as naturalization records, marriage certificates, and military records, and by studying family heirlooms, letters, and photographs.

*The Family History Term Paper*

My expectations concerning the family history term paper are open. The only stipulation that I make is that the students relate the history of their family in some way to larger family patterns discussed in the course. I impress on students that either a genealogy or an autobiography is not acceptable. I jokingly tell them that the only ones interested in when, where, and how their relatives were born, lived, married, and died are other relatives, friends, and the Internal Revenue Service.

The organizing theme of the individual student's term paper revolves around course topics. Some have done papers relating their family dynamics to macro-level concerns. These include comparing family life in rural as opposed to urban settings; changes in the helping patterns that exist with extended kin; comparisons of ethnic family systems in the "old country" and in America; changing ethnic family patterns; the impact of poverty on the family; and changes in social class that are reflected in changes in the family. Papers dealing with micro-level family concerns have included generational comparisons of dating practices; changing attitudes and behavior regarding working wives; changes in parent-child relationships; the changing role of the elderly in the family; the effect of divorce on the family; family violence; and single parenthood.

Students are told to integrate their family history with materials found in the assigned texts and with classroom discussions. Where appropriate, I suggest other texts, monographs, and journal
articles to the student. The students are asked to relate the sociological and historical analyses in these works to their own family historical analysis.

Class Procedures

At the beginning of the semester, I suggest that students make themselves familiar with the structure of the course content as quickly as possible. Using the course syllabus as a guideline, the students are asked to skim through the assigned text and reader for potentially interesting organizing themes.

As I present the beginning lectures of the course, I spend part of the class period indicating how students can integrate lectures and assigned materials into their term paper. This pedagogical technique continues throughout the semester. After the first exam, which covers the “heavy” theoretical materials such as modernization theory and family change, I encourage the students to take an in-depth look at the more substantive Sociology of the Family topics that will be the focus of the balance of the course.

A class period is usually allocated for some informal discussion of students’ ideas. I find that in this open-ended atmosphere students are willing to interact both with me and fellow students in a free interchange of topics and ideas. Typical concerns that students wish to pursue in their term papers are changes in parent-child relationships, and changing marital and familial gender roles. Students are then required to present a one-page research proposal on what they want to do; why they want to do it; who they are going to interview; when they are going to do it; what they hope to find; and how they plan to integrate it back into the course. These proposals are discussed both in class and in private meetings with me. Students, some of whom volunteer, discuss their work in progress at the beginning of each class period, after class, and in conferences. Depending on time allocations, students are invited to present their papers in class. This is always done on a purely voluntary basis. Students are also encouraged, but not required, to submit working drafts of their papers, and final term papers are due at the end of the semester.
Oral History as a Technique in Doing the Family History

A key source of information that should be utilized in the study of family history is oral history. Oral history has the potential to illuminate family behavior and attitudes in a way that goes beyond the capabilities of quantitative data and material artifacts. In this instance oral history as a research technique is of particular importance in the social/historical study of the family. Student researchers can take an instrumental role in gaining family data of greatest interest to them by directing questions regarding particular areas of family history to their respondents.

Oral history makes possible a more three-dimensional portrait of family life. It can focus on internal family processes—the roles of husbands and wives, parents and children, emotional intimacy and conflicts, dating and courtship, sexual behavior and attitudes, fertility patterns, including contraceptive use and abortions, and general involvements—in a way prohibited by other research techniques. Oral history as applied to the study of the immigrant family also has wide applicability to focusing on external family processes—the relationship of the family to labor markets, community patterns both rural and urban, immigration and ethnicity, social class variations, religious and educational institutions, and so on. Oral history can illuminate the significance of immigration and the emergence of ethnic communities through the eyes of those who experienced these historical processes—processes which transformed not only their own and their families' lives but American society and culture as well.

Suggested Interview Topics for Immigrant and Ethnic Family History

A standard curriculum unit in the Sociology of the Family course covers ethnic and class variations in the American family. In this unit, instructors often focus on a given ethnic family group, e.g., the Italian-American family, the Chicano family, the Japanese-American family, the Black family. The discussion follows both historical and sociological lines. Typical is a history of an ethnic family in America and a sociological presentation
that deals with some sociological themes, e.g., marital relations, parent-child relationships, and so on. This mode of presentation is also followed in Sociology of the Family textbooks.

Therefore, because the assignment is a family history that centers on some dimension of ethnicity, the student can pick virtually any substantive topic in the Sociology of the Family course and tie it to ethnic family patterns. I tell students that there are many topics in which they can become involved when doing oral history relating to immigration and ethnicity. One strategy is to integrate their concern with immigration and ethnic families with the substantive Sociology of the Family topics found in such textbooks as my own *The Changing Family: Comparative Perspectives* (second edition, 1988). Following the presentation of topics found in that book, a student could write about his or her immigrant ethnic family in the following ways:

1. Modernization processes and the ethnic family
2. Social and occupational mobility and the effect on family ethnicity
3. The impact of the industrial city on the family
4. Family assimilation and acculturation processes
5. Emergent ethnicity: its manifestation in the family
6. Education and the effects on family ethnicity
7. Family life comparisons before and after coming to America
8. Work and family member involvements
9. Assimilation and acculturation of the family: kinds of adjustments, pressures to conform, etc.
10. Ethnicity and sex roles
11. Ethnic values and parent-child socialization patterns
12. Influence of ethnic background on children’s friendship patterns
13. Ethnicity and marital relationships
14. Ethnic families and extended kinship involvements
15. Ethnicity and dating and courtship patterns
16. The effects of intermarriage on ethnicity
17. Ethnicity and marital sexuality and intimacy
18. The role of the elderly in the ethnic family
19. Ethnic family violence
20. Separation and divorce and the ethnic family
21. Death in the ethnic family

Students select their own topics. I do not select topics for them, nor do I provide them with an initial set of questions. It is my belief that students must take an active role in developing their own family history with minimal interference from me. In this manner they can develop their own research project with their own sociological style and language. For those students who waver and insist that I give them a specific family history assignment, I do, but with a catch. I assign them a topic that I think they would be uninterested in doing. Hence, I am not surprised, but pleased, when a student of African-American heritage protests the rhetorical suggestion to study Northern European immigration families because that history has little to do with what really interests him or her. When students complain, I suggest they give me alternative suggestions. The same strategy is employed in question design. The questions I supply often are preposterous given students' concern and sensitivity regarding matters of family privacy and respect for older family members they will be interviewing. Once students make a sincere effort to generate a bank of questions, I modify the questions and add some that are designed to elicit sufficient information for their term project.

The Family History Interview Process

Students are taught that interviews can be autobiographical or topical. An autobiographical interview does not center on a given topic, such as parent-child relationships or growing up in an ethnic village, but tries to trace the flow of significant events in an individual's life. On the other hand, the topical interview is designed to obtain information about particular topics or themes. In my Sociology of the Family class, I require students to conduct topical interviews around substantive sociology topics that parallel the course outline, class discussions, and the textbook table of contents.
From a methodological standpoint, students learn through “on the job training” how to interview. I provide students with some general guidelines on how and what to ask their families. But, as this is primarily a Sociology of the Family course, and not a course on methodology, I prefer that the students see for themselves what techniques work best. In addition, students who collect family photographs, documents, and heirlooms as research aids are able to assess for themselves the limits and utilities of such materials in the analysis of their family histories.

In interviewing family members, I inform students of the benefits and limitations of formal and informal modes of interviewing. In the *formal interview*, predetermined questions are asked in a rigid, non-varying sequential order. Often, the questions are designed to elicit yes-no or three-to-five category responses. For example: “Do you believe your marriage was a happy one? Yes or No”; or “How would you rate your marriage? 1. Very Happy 2. Happy 3. Acceptable 4. Unhappy 5. Very Unhappy.” These are not open-ended questions. The prime virtue of this method is comparability and uniformity in comparing a large number of interview schedules. This format also permits the researcher to put together large numbers of responses and to report statistical results.

In contrast, the *informal interview* schedule contains general guideline questions that demand the respondent to answer questions discursively rather than simply “yes or no” or “1, 2, 3, 4, or 5.” For the purpose of oral history, I strongly recommend the informal interview as the appropriate format. When conducting informal interviews, students can ask open-ended questions or engage in non-directive conversations. I suggest to students that a question be framed in such a manner that it would direct the respondent to answer the inquiry and would also allow sufficient leeway to bring up topics and materials that may serve as leads to further avenues of inquiry. Students find this a satisfactory interview format. Often those who restrict the interview to the formal mode find that they asked insufficient questions, or that questions asked were not pertinent or informative enough. The informal mode allows greater latitude
and permits modification of the interview schedule on the spot.

Guidelines for interviewing are discussed in class. I follow the format used by Kyvig and Marty in Your Family History (1978: 23-26). They make the following suggestions. Before the interview, explain the project and make arrangements in advance to meet at a convenient time. If possible, gather some background information on the persons being interviewed, e.g., country of origin, when they came to America, when they were married, family circumstances. If you use a tape recorder, check it out before the interview. Practice using it beforehand. Start the interview by situating yourself in a comfortable and quiet place that insures some privacy and little likelihood of interruption. Relax before starting, chat informally, and begin by talking in a conversational style. Check the time, the length of tape, and sound level of the recorder. Try to schedule your interview to take between sixty and ninety minutes. While conducting the interview, let the subject do most of the talking. Keep your questions brief and to the point. Do not break in on a good story, even if it goes off on a tangent. It may disrupt the mood of the session. Further, it may provide leads for additional questions. Ask for details and greater specificity of people, places or events. Use photographs, documents, or other props to encourage and direct conversation.

After the interview session, it is a good idea to tell the students to listen to the interview a few times. (Also, they should offer to play back the recorded interview at their respondent's request.) Students should take notes, highlighting important information and possibly indicating to themselves additional areas that they may investigate if another interview can be arranged. For their term paper, they should integrate the family history with the substantive sociology theme that they chose. For example, if they are concerned with changing dating patterns, they should interweave their sociological discussion with illustrative materials gathered through their family history.
Family History as a Voluntary Assignment

Currently, in my family course, the family history assignment is offered as an option to the students. It is not a course requirement, although it is strongly encouraged. Students have the option of doing other term projects. These have included more traditional library research; pilot questionnaire surveys; and content analysis of popular fiction, television programs, and films. The reason for not making family histories a mandatory assignment is that some students may have trouble gathering information for a variety of reasons, such as the death of key family members or their inaccessibility as a result of divorce, separation or geographic distance. In the latter case, letter writing often proves to be an unacceptable way to gather data. It is too time-consuming and often does not elicit satisfactory responses. Another important factor for making family history an optional assignment is that some students may not have open lines of communication with either nuclear or extended family members. Finally, some family members define such term projects as an invasion of their privacy, choose not to participate, and ask students to respect this request for nonparticipation for their sake and that of other family members.

Textbook Assignments in Family History

In Sociology of the Family courses, I assign a textbook, such as my own book, The Changing Family: Comparative Perspectives. Other texts that present a similar comparative perspective in the sociology of the family are Gerald R. Leslie and Sheila K. Korman's The Family in Social Context (1985) and Maxine Baca Zinn and D. Stanley Etien's Diversity in American Families (1990). The reader, Ethnic Families in America: Patterns and Variations (1988), edited by Charles H. Mindel, Robert W. Habenstein, and Roosevelt Wright, Jr., has proved useful for students working with ethnicity as an important variable in their family histories.

In some classes, I have required a family history handbook. I have used Allan J. Lichtman's Your Family History (1978) or David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty's Your Family History: A
Handbook for Research and Writing (1978). Both have extended discussions on research techniques that include strategies for conducting, recording and interpreting interviews with family members. Both also provide some illustrative questions that could be asked relating to certain substantive themes. Outside of the classroom, these handbooks provide a convenient source of information that nicely supplements my own presentations.

Conclusion
The produced family history is often prized by the student. The history itself becomes incorporated as an important family historical document. I have found that a much greater percentage of students ask for the return of this project at the end of the semester than other forms of term papers. While the overall quality is often uneven, I do find that the exercise serves to enhance students’ personal interest in the subject matter, and often helps to develop a “sociological imagination.”

For instructors, family histories can often provide additional insights into social/historical processes. As a practice, I return all term papers. I do ask selected students’ permission for a copy of their papers. If they desire, I will not share the papers with other faculty or students. For those who give permission, I occasionally share them with others. However, I never reveal the authors’ names. I prefer to be overly cautious and sensitive to personal and family privacy. Particular case studies, anonymously discussed in future classes to preserve the privacy of families, make interesting discussion illustrations.

References