

# Why Study Families and Other Close Relationships?

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## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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| Identify the different definitions of “family” and their implications           | 1.1 |
| Describe the functions of families  | 1.2 |
| Recognize the link between micro-level and macro-level perspectives on families | 1.3 |
| Assess the ways that families are always changing                               | 1.4 |
| Summarize the importance of social science theory and research                  | 1.5 |




**W**hat is a family? This seems a fairly simple question, but it can have a surprisingly complex answer.

Throughout this text, you'll meet people in different types of relationships: married couples, cohabiting couples, same-sex couples, and stepfamilies, to name just a few. Let's introduce a few of these families to you now.



Are Betsy and Karen a family?

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**Video:** *Judith Stacey: How a Family is Defined*

Becca is a 31-year-old single mother of 7-year-old Taylor. Raised in poverty, homeless as a young adult, she has struggled successfully to overcome the odds against her. She is no longer homeless, has completed her degree in community college, and is a loving mother to Taylor. Becca has no relationship with her mother and other relatives. Unfortunately, Becca had to give up a son for adoption before she had Taylor. Today, Becca and Taylor have a good relationship with him and his adoptive family. Are Becca and her mother *family*? Are Taylor and her half-brother *family*?

Melanie, a young woman in her twenties, was devastated by her parents' divorce when she was 10 years old. Like other children whose parents divorced, she harbored dreams that they would one day get back together, even though both parents remarried other people. She had little use for her stepparents at the time, but finally realized that her parents would never remarry when her father and his wife had a baby together. Are Melanie and her stepparents family? Are her half-brother and her mother family?

Meghan and Jonathon—"Jono" as he is called—are a young couple happily in love. They have lived together for a couple of years, and both think they will probably get married someday, even though there has been no explicit discussion of marriage. They believe it's important for her to finish her education first and begin her career. Are Meghan and Jono a family?

Tracey and Juan, unable to have biological children, adopted two beautiful children from Colombia. Juan was born in Colombia and still has family there, so it seemed a natural place to pursue adoption. Tracey and Juan have some information on the birth mother of their son John, but know virtually nothing about the birth mother of their daughter Cassandra. The adoptions are closed—there will be no contact with either birth mother. So, are John and Cassandra's birth mothers part of the family?

Karen and Betsy have been together for 13 years. They talked early on about wanting to raise children together. Today they have two children: Henry, 8, and Jayla, 3. Karen gave birth to Henry, and although Henry's father doesn't live close by, he still plays a role in Henry's life. Jayla was adopted and came to them just before her first birthday. Are Karen and Betsy a family? Are Betsy and Henry a family? Are Henry's father and Jayla a family?

Becca, Melanie, Meghan, Jono, Tracey, Juan, Karen, and Betsy represent some of today’s families. The number of “traditional” two-parent heterosexual families has declined, while the number of non-traditional families is on the rise. Together we’ll examine these trends, look at their causes, and discuss their implications.

**W**hat is a *family*? Who would guess that such a commonly used word could generate disagreement? We all probably come from some kind of family. Students of all ages crave information about families, including love, sex, relationships, marriage, and children. Unfortunately, most students have a very individualized view of these issues. They tend to emphasize personal choices without focusing on the broader social, cultural, and historical conditions that shape these choices. This chapter will show you how our personal experiences are shaped by the social structure in which we live. To do this, we introduce you to the latest in research and theory. Be prepared not only to learn “fun facts” to share with your friends, but also be ready to open yourself up to new ways of thinking about the world and your place in it.

## How Do We Define Family?

Welcome to the study of families! This text takes you on a journey of personal self-discovery and greater social awareness. We’ll learn about love and dating, cohabitation and marriage, parenting, aging families, divorce and remarriage, families and work, and family crises. Like all journeys, we’ll encounter bumps along the road—issues like miscommunication, jealousy, economic problems, discrimination, violence, and other stressors. However, we’ll also encounter sources of strength that help families cope with these stressors—education, legislation to help families, and cultural change that has led to greater acceptance of diversity in family life.

Today, we’re surrounded by child-free married couples, multigenerational families, unmarried adults who cohabit and who sometimes have children, step-parents whose stepchildren live with them only part-time, and gay and lesbian partnerships. These types of living arrangements are increasing, while the more traditional type of family—husband, wife, and children all living together—is declining in numbers (Lofquist, Lugaila, O’Connell, & Feliz, 2012; Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013).

With such a variety of relationships, how can we define *family*? Some people believe that a couple must be married legally to be considered a family. Others think that children must be present—certainly, you’ve heard people ask, “So, when are you going to start a family?” They mean, of course, “So, when are you going to have children?” And still others believe that gay and lesbian partners don’t really qualify as a family regardless of their level of commitment to one another.

## Legal versus Social Science Definitions

How would you define *family*? With all these different possibilities, it’s important to stop and reflect on your own views for a moment. The feature box *Getting to Know Yourself: How Do You Define Family?* gives you a chance to think about your definition, and then perhaps, compare it to the way other people think.

The U.S. Census Bureau defines a *family* as two or more people living together who are related by birth, marriage, or adoption. Heterosexual or

**1.1** Identify the different definitions of “family” and their implications

### Questions That Matter

- 1.1 How does this text define *family*, and how does it differ from a legal perspective?
- 1.2 Why is the definition of *family* so important?

What is a family? Opinions differ. Let's see what you think. Please answer how you think regarding each statement. There are no right or wrong answers here, just your opinions. Your answers can include:

**1 = Yes; 2 = Unsure; 3 = No**

- \_\_\_ 1. Elian and Rosa have been living together for two years, but are not married, nor have they seriously discussed marriage. Are they a family?
- \_\_\_ 2. Jake and Tina have a child together, but they live in separate cities and see each other about once every month or two. Are they a family?
- \_\_\_ 3. Soolyn and Tran are married and have two young daughters. Are they a family?
- \_\_\_ 4. Jonathan and Patrick have been together for almost a year, and spend all their time together. They each have their own place to live, but Patrick has his house up for sale, and as soon as it sells, he'll move in with Jonathan. Are they a family?
- \_\_\_ 5. William and Jenica have cohabited for seven years and have no children. Are they a family?
- \_\_\_ 6. Janie, Helen, and Rachel live with a man who is legally married to only one of them, yet all three women consider themselves married to him, a practice known as *polygamy*. Are they a family?
- \_\_\_ 7. Hannah, 16, ran away from her parents' home last summer and has been living on the streets. She has since met up with a group of runaway and homeless youth. Together they beg or steal food, and some of the young people prostitute themselves to earn

money for the group. They take care of one another. Are they a family?

- \_\_\_ 8. Corey, 8, has lived in four different foster homes since he was taken away from his drug-addicted and violent parents when he was 3. He has lived in his current foster home for 2 years and has a good relationship with the family in which he lives. His foster parents treat him just like they treat their other children. He does not know how much longer he will stay there, but hopes it is for a long time. Are they a family?
- \_\_\_ 9. Dee has five children fathered by five different men. She has never been married. The fathers rarely if ever pay child support and only a few come around sporadically to see her or their child. Are Dee and her children's fathers a family?
- \_\_\_ 10. Lucas and Emma are a married couple who are firmly committed to not having children. Are they a family?

Tally your answers. The lower the score, the broader your definition of family. The higher your score, the more narrow your definition of family. Compare your answers with others. How do you compare?

#### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. What is your score? Do you have a broad or narrow definition of family, or are you somewhere in between?
2. Where do you think your views have come from? Do they reflect the values of your parents, your culture, or your peers? Which of these influences is the strongest, and why?

**family:** A relationship by blood, marriage, or affection, in which members may cooperate economically, may care for children, and may consider their identity to be intimately connected to the larger group.

**family of orientation:** The family that you are born into.

**family of procreation:** The family you make through marriage, partnering, and/or parenthood.

**fictive kin:** Nonrelatives whose bonds are strong and intimate.

homosexual unmarried partners are excluded from this definition. The U.S. government continues to use this traditional definition as the basis for many social programs and policies. However, many people object to the Census Bureau's definition because it excludes groups who consider themselves to be families. They argue that government should expand its definition of *family* because it doesn't adequately reflect the reality of the rich diversity of family life in our society today (Boss, Doherty, LaRossa, Schumm, & Steinmetz, 1993 (reprinted 2008); Lloyd, Few, & Allen, 2009; Trask & Hamon, 2007). If people believe they are a family, these feelings shouldn't be ignored because of rigid definitions.

The leading scholarly journal about families, published by the National Council on Family Relations, changed its name from *The Journal of Marriage and the Family* to *The Journal of Marriage and Family* (deleting the second *the*), reflecting the growing recognition that families come in many forms. This text also opts for a broader, more inclusive definition, proposing that a **family** is a relationship by blood, marriage, or affection, in which members may cooperate economically, may care for children, and may consider their identity to be intimately connected to the larger group. It can include a **family of orientation**, which is the family that you are born into, and a **family of procreation**, which is the family you make through marriage, partnering, and/or parenthood.

This text includes **fictive kin** in its definition of family. *Fictive kin* are nonrelatives whose bonds are strong and intimate, such as the relationships shared



among unmarried homosexual or heterosexual partners, or very close friends. Fictive kin can provide important services and support for individuals, including financial assistance or help through life transitions (Heslin, Hamilton, Singzon, Smith, & Anderson, 2011). Nonetheless, fictive kin are routinely passed over for critical benefits that more traditional family members have come to expect, such as health insurance or tax advantages.

## Why Are Definitions So Important?

Why should we care about the definition of a *family*? How society defines a family has important consequences with respect to rights, including access to a spouse's or partner's Social Security benefits, pensions, and health insurance (Employee Benefit Research Institute, 2013; Human Rights Campaign, 2013). For example, unmarried partners can't file jointly on federal taxes. Many employer health insurance plans cover only a worker's spouse and dependent children. Unmarried partners may be excluded completely from coverage. Therefore, if an unmarried couple with one employed partner has children, the children may be covered under the employed parent's health insurance plan, but the partner may be excluded. These decisions involve billions of dollars in employer and government benefits and affect millions of adults and children each year, as shown in the feature box "Policy and You: From Macro to Micro." In addition, special membership discounts to a wide variety of organizations are available to families, but not to people who are roommates or friends.

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There are many different kinds of families, including traditional married couples, same-sex couples, and even fictive kin.



One clear way in which societal definitions of *family* affect our individual relationships can be seen in our marriage laws. In most places around the country, unmarried adults in long-term, committed relationships are routinely denied important benefits, such as spousal health insurance or dental care, bereavement leave, relocation benefits, or the benefit of filing joint tax returns or receiving Social Security. Unmarried adults, homosexual and heterosexual, face numerous obstacles simply because they lack the legal status of marriage. These obstacles affect the security and well-being of millions of families.

However, employers are recognizing that denying benefits to partners in committed relationships may be not only unjust, but also bad for business. In 1982, the New York City weekly *The Village Voice* became the first employer to offer “domestic partner benefits.” Since that time, more than 9,300 employers have chosen to offer domestic partner benefits to an employee’s unmarried partner, whether of the same or opposite sex. These employers include nearly 300 Fortune 500 companies, along with city, county, and state agencies.

Why do a growing number of employers offer benefits to domestic partners? One reason is simple fairness. Many employers believe that offering benefits to their employees’ legally married partners, but not to nonlegal married partners, discriminates on the basis of sexual orientation and/or marital status. Because same-sex couples cannot legally marry in most states, their partners have traditionally been excluded from receiving benefits on the grounds that they are not part of an employee’s legal family.

A second reason is competition in today’s labor market. To attract and retain a high-quality, diverse workforce, employers must offer a comprehensive benefit package. Offering domestic partner benefits is simply a sound business practice.

Several states have passed or are considering laws that establish domestic partnerships for committed same-sex couples. These laws provide all of the same state-granted privileges, immunities, rights, benefits, and responsibilities for same-sex couples entering a domestic partnership that are granted to married couples. Other states, under pressure from conservatives, are restricting these benefits, at least for state employees. Regardless of state policy, however, unmarried persons are ineligible for specific federal benefits such as filing joint tax returns and cannot receive Social Security as a spouse. This example shows that our laws and definition of what constitutes a family can be powerfully felt at the personal level.

Source: Employee Benefit Research Institute. February 2009; Human Rights Campaign, 2009, 2012.

#### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. Should an employer’s domestic partner benefits cover both homosexual and heterosexual relationships? Why or why not?
2. Should we leave it to employers or to the state or federal government to decide whether to offer domestic partner benefits?

- 1.2 Describe the functions of families

#### Question That Matters

- 1.3 What are the functions that families provide?

**marriage:** An institutional arrangement between persons to publicly recognize social and intimate bonds.

## The Functions of Families

Why do people marry? Why do we live in families? Whereas some functions of marriage and families might differ from one society to another, what is more remarkable is how *similar* these are across time and place. All societies have **marriage**, an institutional arrangement between persons to publicly recognize social and intimate bonds. There are clear norms that specify who is eligible to be married, to whom and how many people an individual can marry, what the marriage ceremony should be like, and how married persons should behave. Anthropologist William Stephens (1963) provided a broad definition of *marriage*: (1) it is a socially legitimate sexual union; (2) begun with a public announcement; (3) undertaken with some idea of permanence; and (4) assumed with a more or less explicit marriage contract that spells out reciprocal obligations between spouses, and between spouses and their children. Marriages and families in all cultures include such functions as

*In thinking about your family of orientation, how did your own family fulfill these functions? For example, how did your family socialize you and teach you about the culture you live in? How did your family care for, love, and nurture you? What type of identity and social position did your family give you?*

- **Regulation of Sexual Behavior:** Every culture, including your own, regulates sexual behavior, including who can have sex with whom and under what circumstances they can do so. One virtually universal regulation is the *incest taboo* that forbids sexual activity (and marriage) among close family members. The definition of a *close family member* differs, but includes at least parents and their children, and siblings. The incest taboo reduces the chance of inherited genetic abnormalities, and it also forges broader alliances by requiring marriage outside of the inner family circle.

- **Reproducing and Socializing Children:** Each society must produce new members and ensure **socialization**, teaching children the rules, expectations, and culture of that society. Societies generally prefer that reproduction occur within an established family, rather than randomly among unrelated partners so that birth parents will be responsible for socializing children.
- **Property and Inheritance:** For much of human history, when people were nomadic hunters and gatherers, families owned little or nothing of their own, and so had nothing to pass down or to inherit. However, the invention of agriculture made it possible for people to own property, or to obtain a surplus beyond what they needed for survival. Thus, it became important to identify heirs. Monogamy ensured that men would know who their heirs were; without monogamy, paternity was uncertain (Engels, 1902, original 1884).
- **Economic Cooperation:** A family is the group responsible for providing its members with food, shelter, clothing, and other basic necessities. Family members work with each other to provide these necessities. Often there is a gendered division of labor, although what constitutes *male tasks* and *female tasks* varies from one society to the next.
- **Social Placement, Status, and Roles:** Families give their members a social identity and position. Members find their place in the complex web of *statuses* (the positions that people occupy in a group or in a society) and *roles* (the behaviors associated with those positions). For example, families give us our initial social class position, provide us with a religious affiliation, and give us a racial and an ethnic identity.
- **Care, Warmth, Protection, and Intimacy:** Humans need far more than food, shelter, and clothing to survive. Families are intended to provide the emotional care needed to survive and thrive. Although romantic love might not be a basis for marriage in many societies, spouses are expected to care for and protect each other, and to love and nurture their children.

Most of us have lived in some sort of family, so we naturally think of ourselves as “experts” on the topic; yet our personal experiences are part of a larger picture. Although all of us experience family life as individuals, we can’t fully understand this experience without appreciating the environment in which it takes place. The remainder of this chapter introduces the three key themes that are the focus of this text.



**socialization:** The process by which people learn the rules, expectations, and culture of society.

 **Watch on MySocLab**  
Video: Families: The Basics

Families have many functions in society. One of the universal functions of families is to care for and nurture the children.

## Theme 1: Linking the Micro-level and Macro-level Perspectives on Families

First, the best way to truly understand families is to link two perspectives: the “micro-level” and the “macro-level.” Although it’s easy to think of our relationships solely in personal terms, they’re actually shaped in large part by **social structure**, the patterns of social organization that guide our interactions with others. Let’s discuss this topic further.

We live in a society with hundreds of millions of other people, most of whom also have families. Most of the time, we focus on the uniqueness of our own

- 1.3** Recognize the link between micro-level and macro-level perspectives on families

### Questions That Matter

- 1.4** What is the difference between a *micro-level* and a *macro-level* perspective for the study of families?
- 1.5** What is *social structure*, and why is it important?



**social structure:** A stable framework of social relationships that guides our interactions with others.

**micro-level:** Focus on the individual and his or her interactions in specific settings.

**macro-level:** Focus on the interconnectedness of marriage, families, and intimate relationships with the rest of society.

**social institution:** A major sphere of social life, with a set of beliefs and rules that is organized to meet basic human needs.

relationships: “I love him because . . .” “We get along so well because . . .” “I chose to marry her because . . .” “We decided not to have children because . . .” Many people focus primarily on this **micro-level** perspective, concentrating exclusively on their individual interactions in specific settings. People who use this perspective focus on individual uniqueness, personal decision making, and the interactions between small groups of people in specific situations. For example, if you were taking a micro-level perspective on family problems, you might conclude that divorce could be reduced by teaching couples better communication skills, that violence can be controlled by learning to manage anger more effectively, or that stressed families balancing the demands of work and family just need to learn to manage their time better. In other words, a micro-level perspective emphasizes the importance of relationship dynamics, including personal choices or constraints, but doesn’t place those family dynamics into their social context.

Although each relationship is certainly unique, families also behave in remarkably predictable ways. For example, if your female cousin told you that she is getting married next year, could you guess the color of her wedding dress? Of course, her dress could be any color of the rainbow, or even black with pink stripes! However, you would probably guess that her dress will be white.

Our relationships are fairly predictable because they operate within the larger social structure. One important theme you will find throughout this text is that *elements of social structure shape our daily experiences, privileges, and constraints*. The personal choices that we make—such as whom we marry; whether we have children and, if so, how many; how we divide household labor; what type of job we get; or the childcare we arrange—are all affected by social structure.

A **macro-level** perspective examines how marriage, families, and intimate relationships are interconnected with the rest of society and its institutions. Families are not isolated entities. Realizing how social, cultural, economic, and political forces influence families helps us understand our supposedly “personal” choices. Dating, marriage, divorce, domestic violence, work–family stress, and teen pregnancy are social processes rooted in social structure. To understand these processes, we must examine the organization of that social structure.

## Family as a Social Institution

Because families and close relationships fulfill many of our personal needs, it’s easy to forget that families are also a **social institution**: a major sphere of social life, with a set of beliefs and rules organized to meet basic human needs. Therefore, in addition to discussing *your* specific family, throughout this text we’ll discuss the social context of families. Families are a social institution in much the same way that political, economic, religious, healthcare, and educational systems are social institutions. In early human civilizations, the family was the center of most activities. Within families, people learned and practiced religion, educated their young, and took care of the sick. Over time, other institutions took on many of these functions. Today, people worship in churches, educate children in schools, and go to hospitals when they are sick.

People still want to marry, despite a high divorce rate in the United States. Most individuals agree on some fundamental expectations between a husband and a wife, such as marital fidelity. For example, a 2011 Gallup Poll, based on a large representative sample of adults, found that more than 90 percent of Americans believe it is morally wrong for married men or women to have an affair (Gallup Poll, June 2, 2011).

Like other social institutions, families can’t be understood without examining how they influence and are influenced by social institutions. Religious customs, the type of economy, the structure of education, and the political system



all shape family patterns, as do our attitudes, behaviors, and opportunities. For example, until recently in Afghanistan, the Taliban did not allow girls to go to school or women to work outside the home. Women had virtually no power inside or outside the family; today, although there have been improvements, women and girls continue to face major constraints on their lives (Oxfam International, 2011; Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, 2013; Trust in Education, 2013).

## Social Status and Families

In addition to social institutions, another aspect of social structure is **status**, or the social position(s) we occupy. You hold many statuses; you may be a daughter or son, a student, an employee, a friend, a roommate, or a parent, to name just a few. A **master status** is a status that tends to dominate the others. Most of us hold several master statuses, each with a set of privileges or constraints. Sex, race, ethnicity, and social class represent some of the major organizing constructs in our society, as we shall see in Chapter 2. For example, when the Pew Research Center interviewed second-generation Hispanics and Asians about their views of success, nearly three-quarters of both groups believed that “most people can get ahead if they work hard.” In contrast, only 58 percent of the full adult population felt that way (Pew Research Center, February 7, 2013b). Why do you think there is such a large racial and ethnic difference in something as fundamental as what it takes to succeed? Are Asians and Hispanics just more positive by nature, or could there be some structural reasons for their views, such as witnessing their parents’ assimilation?

How do micro-level and macro-level perspectives together shed light on families? The feature box “Tying It All Together” shows the interrelationship between these perspectives. Next, you’ll read about one detailed example of how macro-level issues can influence our personal choices—unemployment and marriage rates—and throughout this text you’ll see many more ways that micro-level and macro-level issues are linked.

**status:** The social position that a person occupies.

**master status:** The major defining status or statuses that a person occupies.

### TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

#### The Interrelationship of Micro-level and Macro-level Factors

What do we mean by *micro-level* and *macro-level factors or perspectives*? Both are important for understanding marriage, families, and intimate relationships. At a micro-level, the focus is on the individual and his or her social interactions. Opportunities, choices, and constraints are made or experienced by the individual, without much thought given to the social and cultural context in which that person lives. In contrast, a macro-level understanding shows us that our personal relationships are interconnected with the rest of society. Social structure influences the opportunities, choices, and constraints that we experience in everywhere in life, including in intimate relationships.

#### MICRO-LEVEL FACTORS

The focus is on the individual and his or her social interactions:

- Personal choices
- Behaviors
- Feelings
- Communication
- Decisions
- Constraints
- Values

#### MACRO-LEVEL FACTORS

The focus is on the way our personal relationships interconnect with the rest of society, the recognition that our social structure influences our marriages and families:

- Culture
- History
- Power and inequality
- Social institutions, including the economy, political system, or dominant religion
- Social status, including sex, race, ethnicity, and social class
- Social movements and social change

#### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. Can you think of three ways in which our culture has shaped your personal attitudes or values about specific family or intimate relationships?
2. How would a social institution such as the dominant religion affect you personally if you do not practice that religion? For example, how would Christianity affect you if you are Jewish?

## An Example of the Interrelationship of Macro-level and Micro-level Perspectives: Unemployment and Marriage Rates

Many people are concerned about the number of single-parent households headed by women. People often wonder why these women keep having children outside of the institution of marriage. Terry Lynn is one of these women, and if you look closer, you can see that her life choices are grounded in a social context.

Terry Lynn is a single mother who has never married and is raising a 6-year-old daughter alone, with the temporary help of cash welfare assistance (Seccombe, 2014). She is a shy young woman, yet at the same time, she's eager to tell her story. Terry Lynn works part-time at a bowling alley, a good job considering her weak reading and writing skills. She takes the bus to work, and various shifts sometimes keep her at work well into the night. She is savvy about the additional help she needs to support her child, and therefore deliberately keeps her employment hours below a certain threshold so that she and her daughter will continue to qualify for Medicaid, the government-sponsored health insurance program. Her employer doesn't offer health insurance, and even at the age of 24, Terry Lynn knows that providing coverage for her daughter is vital. She and her daughter live with a sister in a cramped, rundown, two-bedroom apartment in an unfashionable part of town. The furniture is second hand, and the couch is threadbare. Nonetheless, Terry Lynn is proud of herself and her daughter for "making it" on their own. You may wonder where the child's father is. He comes around now and then, she says, usually when he wants money or sex from her. Does Terry Lynn ever plan to marry him? Her answer is a definite "No."

Single-parent households have been blamed extensively for a wide variety of social ills. They are far more likely than other families to be poor (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2012). Why are so many women, especially poor and low-income women like Terry Lynn, having children without marrying their children's fathers?

We might be tempted to look at micro-level factors and ask what is happening within intimate relationships, specifically the personal aspects of these relationships, including the couples' values, choices, and communication. Certainly, these are important; but many people have found that poor women seem to value marriage quite highly. In fact, if anything, perhaps they value it *too* highly. They believe that their own relationships will never meet the "gold standard" they have set for themselves, such as a partner with a steady job, the chance to own their own home, and a reasonably lavish wedding ceremony. Because of this, they shy away from marriage (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Seccombe, 2015).

Therefore, we must look at macro-level factors to explain why poor women are often hesitant to marry their partners. William Julius Wilson has suggested that the high unemployment rate of inner-city urban dwellers contributes to their low marriage rate. In his well-known books, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987) and *When Work Disappears* (1996), Wilson pointed out that many poor women see marriage to inner-city men as risky because the men can't support families on their meager wages (Wilson, 1987; 1996). Furthermore, as factories and businesses move out to the suburbs or overseas, unemployment and poverty rates escalate. Consequently, there is a shortage of employed men whom these women see as good marriage prospects. Wilson shows us that our changing economy (macro-level factor) has a significant effect on individual relationship choices (micro-level factor).

In addition to high unemployment, or perhaps interrelated with it, are many other reasons why poor women may have trouble finding a suitable mate. For example, homicide, violence, drug addiction, and incarceration

**W**hy do you think that people rush to micro-level explanations and interpretations of family life, and forget to think about the macro-level? Can you give some examples of specific issues when you have done this?

have all taken a tremendous toll on young Black men. In Terry Lynn’s case, the father of her child was unemployed and has been in and out of jail, so she didn’t see him as a reliable “good catch.” Although she cared for him, why would she want to marry him?

Many poor women share these concerns regardless of race or ethnic background (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Seccombe, 2014). Clearly, the “choices” that people make in their personal relationships occur in conjunction with other larger developments in society, such as economic conditions, crime rates, immigration policies, technological advances, changes in women’s opportunities, new conceptions of fatherhood, and a wide variety of social and political movements.

Although macro-level forces that may seem outside of our immediate control shape our personal micro-level interactions, we aren’t passive recipients of these forces. **Human agency** is the ability of human beings to create viable lives, even when constrained or limited by social forces (Baca Zinn, Eitzen, & Wells, 2010). Rich, poor, male, female, young, or old—we all actively direct our lives, even though powerful social forces help shape our opportunities. We do have free choice, but we need to be aware of the ways that social structure influences our lives and choices.

**human agency:** The ability of human beings to create viable lives even when they are constrained or limited by social forces.

## Theme 2: Families Are Always Changing

A second theme you will see throughout this text is that *families are not monolithic or static, but instead are ever-changing*. People have constructed families to meet their needs; therefore, change should be anticipated and not feared. To illustrate this concept, let’s first see how families are arranged throughout the world in terms of patterns of authority, rules of descent, and patterns of residence. Second, let’s examine the changes in marriage and family patterns in China, a country in the midst of rapid economic and social transformation. Third, let’s review marriage and family patterns in U.S. history. Taken together, these examples illustrate the second theme of this text: that the singular, monolithic family structure is largely a myth; *families have always been, and always will be, changing*.

### Marriage Patterns

How do you imagine a marriage? Like many people, you probably assume that a marriage consists of only two people, a marriage pattern called **monogamy**. Monogamy is found widely, although not exclusively, throughout the world.

Other societies practice **polygamy**, which allows either a husband or wife to have more than one spouse at a time. There are two types of polygamy. The more common type is **polygyny**, in which a husband can have more than one wife (Henrich, Boyd, & Richerson, 2012; Omariba & Boyle, 2007). Although illegal in the United States, there may be 30,000 to 50,000 Americans who currently practice polygyny, primarily in the western states (Anderson, 2010). Altman and Ginat (1996) found that, on average, polygamous families in the United States contained 4 wives and 27 children.

Polygyny is legal in several regions of the world today, including parts of Africa, the Middle East, and South America, and is often supported by religious custom. Researchers Charles Welch and Paul Glick examined 15 African countries and found that between one in five and one in three married men had more than one wife. Obviously, not all men can have more than one wife, given existing sex ratios. Welch and Glick found that those who practiced polygyny tended to have two, or occasionally three, wives (Welch & Glick, 1981). Having numerous wives is a sign of family wealth, education, and other dimensions of high

**1.4** Assess the ways that families are always changing

#### Questions That Matter

- 1.6 What types of marriage and kinship patterns exist around the world?
- 1.7 How would we characterize the changes in China’s families and family policy in recent generations?
- 1.8 How have families changed throughout history, and what are the macro-level factors that have contributed to that change?

**monogamy:** Marriage between one man and one woman.

**polygamy:** A system that allows for more than one spouse at a time (gender unspecified).

**polygyny:** A marriage pattern in which husbands can have more than one wife.

 **Watch on MySocLab**  
**Video:** Families: Sociology in Focus



Although polygamy is illegal in the United States, thousands of families practice a specific type—polygyny, with one man married to multiple women.

**polyandry:** The marriage pattern in which wives are allowed to have more than one husband.

**patriarchy:** A form of social organization in which the norm or expectation is that men have a natural right to be in positions of authority over women.

**matriarchy:** A form of social organization in which the norm or expectation is that the power and authority in society would be vested in women.

**egalitarian:** The expectation that power and authority are equally vested in men and women.

**bilateral:** Descent that can be traced through both male and female sides of the family.

**patrilineal:** A descent pattern where lineage is traced exclusively (or at least primarily) through the man's family line.

status. Men use it as a way to increase fertility within a family, because having more than one wife increases the number of children born within the family.

The second type of polygamy is **polyandry**, in which one wife is married to multiple husbands (Monger, 2004; Stone, 2006). This type of marriage pattern is rare, and more likely to occur in societies that experience harsh environmental conditions with widespread poverty, such as among nomadic Tibetans in Nepal or in parts of rural northern China or India. Multiple husbands are often brothers or otherwise related to one another, and the marriage occurs to provide economic advantages. Brothers may live together as adults to share resources, and children are more

likely to survive if they have the contribution of many fathers. Often, there are fewer women in these societies to marry because of female infanticide, as the birth of an infant girl may be seen as burdensome to families.

## Patterns of Authority

In countries that practice **patriarchy** (“rule of the father”), men are assumed to have a natural right to be in positions of authority over women. In such a society, patriarchy is manifested and upheld in legal, educational, religious, economic, and other social institutions. The legal system may prevent women from voting; the educational system may provide an unequal education for girls or even refuse to offer them any formal education at all; and religious institutions may attribute male dominance to “God’s will.” Patriarchy is widespread throughout the world. The opposite of patriarchy is **matriarchy**, in which social power and authority is vested in women. However, this is what is known as a *theoretical alternative*, because no historical cases of true matriarchies are known.

Between these two extremes are authority patterns that could best be described as approaching **egalitarian**. In these societies, the expectation is that power and authority are equally vested in both men and women. Although the United States and many other developed countries are headed in this direction, it would be wrong to assume that all vestiges of patriarchy have been eliminated, as you’ll see in Chapter 2.

## Patterns of Descent

Where did you get your last name? How is property passed down from one generation to another? Whom do you consider to be your legal relatives? Developed nations most commonly use a **bilateral** pattern of descent, in which descent can be traced through both male and female sides of the family. For example, in the United States it’s widely recognized that both your mother’s parents *and* your father’s parents are related to you—you have, potentially, two sets of grandparents.

In a **patrilineal** pattern, lineage is traced exclusively (or at least primarily) through the man’s family line. If you lived in a patrilineal society, your father’s relatives are recognized as your kin, but only minimal connections with your mother’s side of the family are noted. Even though the United States uses a primarily bilateral model in establishing descent, traces of patrilineal descent still exist: (1) last names almost always reflect the father’s lineage rather than the mother’s, and (2) sons are sometimes given their father’s first names as well and are then referred to as “Jr.” or by a number (III, IV). Notice that there is no



semantic equivalent for girls; they are not referred to as “Maria Gonzales, Jr.” or as “Emma Smith III.”

Finally, a few societies, including some Native American tribes, can be characterized as having **matrilineal** descent patterns because the lineage is more closely aligned with women’s families than with men’s families. This pattern is not the mirror opposite of a patrilineal pattern, however. In a matrilineal descent pattern, women pass their lineage on through their brothers or other male family members.

## Residence Patterns

With whom do you expect to live with after you marry? In industrial societies like the United States, most couples plan to live separately from either set of parents, a **neolocal** residence pattern. Families in other parts of the world practice **patrilocal** residence, meaning that the couple is expected to live with the husband’s family. Less common is a **matrilocal** pattern, in which the newly married couple routinely lives with the wife’s family.

These different marriage and family patterns, summarized in Table 1.1 (p. 13), have real consequences for the way we experience family life, including whom and how we marry, where we should live, who should have power, and how we inherit and trace our lineage.

How do these marriage and family patterns begin, and how do they change? A look at modern-day China shows the influence of a changing society.

## Families in Transition: China

Yue Jiang Wang, who is 60 and lives in the largely rural Yunnan Province of China, is perplexed by young people today. He believes they want too much freedom, and with that freedom will come too many costly mistakes. “They even want to choose their own spouses,” he sighs. Jiang married his wife Chang Mei Lin when he was 17 and she was 16. Their marriage was arranged by their parents, with the help of a matchmaker. Together they had seven children—three boys and four girls. Jiang met Mei Lin for the first time during their wedding ceremony. Their marriage began with “respect,” but Jiang believes that they grew to love one another.

Jiang is confused by many aspects of life he observes in today’s China, a country that has undergone many revolutionary changes in the past few decades. The new market-based economy is developing rapidly, education levels are rising, and cars and the infrastructure they require are altering the rural landscape dramatically. All these changes have affected many traditional beliefs, including those surrounding women’s roles, marriage, and children.


Jiang and Mei Lin married in 1959, and a study conducted of people just like Mei Lin—women who married in China between 1933 and 1987—found that more than 70 percent had had no other boyfriends and more than 90 percent had not

**matrilineal:** A descent pattern where lineage is traced exclusively or primarily within women’s families.

**neolocal:** The expectation that a newly married couple establishes a residence and lives there independently.

**patrilocal:** The expectation that a newly married couple will live with the husband’s family.

**matrilocal:** The expectation that a newly married couple will live with the wife’s family.

TABLE 1.1 Marriage and Family Diversity Around the World	
<i>Can you identify the marriage and family patterns found in the United States?</i>	
<b>Marriage Patterns</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monogamy</li> <li>• Polygamy               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>—Polygyny</li> <li>—Polyandry</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
<b>Patterns of Authority</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Patriarchy</li> <li>• Matriarchy</li> <li>• Egalitarian</li> </ul>	
<b>Patterns of Descent</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bilateral</li> <li>• Patrilineal</li> <li>• Matrilineal</li> </ul>	
<b>Patterns of Residence</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neolocal</li> <li>• Patrilocal</li> <li>• Matrilocal</li> </ul>	

considered marrying anyone besides their husbands (Xu & Whyte, 1990). Today, many Chinese men and women, especially those from urban areas, date and socialize with many partners before they marry, and they're sexually active and cohabit (Chu & Yu, 2009; Wang & Davidson, 2006). They want to choose their own mates. They're likely to meet their spouse at school, at work, through a mutual friend, or even through the Internet, rather than through parents, relatives, or matchmakers.

Yet, despite these new freedoms to choose their own mates, couples in China still can't marry freely. The central government requires people who plan to marry to apply for permission and to register officially on a waiting list with the local government. The government regulates when a couple can marry because it's one way to regulate births. China had a large and exploding population, and beginning in the late 1970s, the government decided to control the number of births so that the country would be able to feed and care for all its members. Until the policy was liberalized in late 2013, most families were permitted to have only one child. Now, if both husband and wife are single children themselves, they will be permitted to have two children. When a couple wants to have children, they must again ask the government for permission to do so. A couple can't simply "get pregnant" without facing grave consequences, such as a heavy fine or strong encouragement to have an abortion (Waldmeir, 2013; Wang, Cai, & Gu, 2012).

The one-child policy has greatly increased the standard of living of the Chinese people. The population has been reduced by at least 300 million people—the size of the entire U.S. population—compared to what it would have been without the policy (Rosenberg, 2009). Chinese families can offer their single child the best of everything: the best education, their undivided attention, a more spacious house, and more disposable income.

Unfortunately, the one-child policy has also had many horrific side effects. Millions of baby girls have virtually disappeared. In a patriarchal country where people value boys more because they carry on the family lineage and take care of aging parents, and girls are considered an economic liability, should we be surprised that if couples are allowed only one child, they prefer a boy? Female fetuses have been aborted, and baby girls have been killed or abandoned. Other girls are kept hidden by their parents, and their births are not recorded in birth registries so that their parents can try again for a boy. Therefore, these hidden girls are ineligible for government benefits like health care or education. As a result, sex ratios in China are becoming exceedingly imbalanced, with 120 young boys for every 100 girls (Chi et al., 2013).

China is currently undergoing rapid social change, fueled in part by the one-child policy that has been in effect for a generation.



Many people around the world have become alarmed by this situation, as have Chinese government officials. In a country that cherishes family, the disappearance of girls is seen as a failure of what was intended to be a policy to strengthen families. As a result, the Chinese have banned elective amniocentesis tests and have restricted the use of ultrasound scanners so that families cannot determine the sex of a fetus. They have also implemented a mass education effort to promote the idea that the birth of a girl is "just as good" as the birth of a boy (Zhu, Li, & Hesketh, 2009).

There is some evidence that their efforts may be working. A survey conducted in three provinces shows that son preference has weakened considerably (Chi et al., 2013). Also, China may have fewer abandoned girls

available for adoption. In 2012, 2,696 Chinese-born children (mostly girls) were adopted in the United States, down from a high of 7,900 in 2005 (U.S. Department of State, 2013).

Meanwhile, Jiang and Mei Lin, who had an arranged marriage and seven children many years ago, are proud that their children heed the government's call to have only one child. They remain, however, quite confused about many other decisions of their children, including their move to urban areas, their daughters' desire to go to college, their plans to share housekeeping and child-care with spouses, and their use of new gadgets and technology.

## History of Family Life in the United States

To further understand how families are continually changing, one only need look at families throughout our own history. But how do we learn about families in earlier times, if no one is alive today to tell us about them? The feature box *Why Do Research? How to Study Families from the Past* (p. 15) gives us some clues about how historians can learn about some of the dynamics of these early families.

**FAMILY LIFE IN COLONIAL AMERICA: EUROPEAN COLONISTS** Family historians have shown that families were the cornerstone of colonial society (Coontz, 2005b; Demos, 1970; Laslett, 1971; Mintz, 2004). They were the primary social institution, helping early immigrants adapt to life in the New World. Families acted as

- *Businesses.* Families were the central focus of economic production. Each household was nearly self-sufficient, and men, women, and children worked together to meet their material needs, including producing food, clothing, furniture, and household goods.
- *Schools.* Formal schooling conducted away from home was extremely rare. Instead, parents educated their children, teaching them how to read and

### Why Do Research?

#### How to Study Families from the Past

Piecing together the history of family life has become an active topic of research. Drawing on a variety of historical documents, including diaries; letters; birth, marriage, and death registries; and immigration records, historians attempt to weave together a social history of the United States to reveal the daily lives, customs, and lifestyles of ordinary citizens. This is a radical departure from the work of most historians who focus on events such as wars, economic downturns, or other large-scale social events. Because the field of social history is relatively new, and many historical documents have been lost or are unavailable, significant gaps exist in our understanding of history, especially about the dynamics of early minority families.

Historians and family scholars get creative as they piece together the past. Historical records can provide an aggregate record about immigration trends, age at first marriage, or the average length of time between marriage and first birth. Slave auctions, ledgers, and other transactions help us understand what—and who—was being bought and sold. Diaries and letters can reveal what was on the minds of ordinary people, including how they saw the world and how they expressed their views. Newspapers and magazines can reveal fads, fash-

ions, and the mood of the era. All of these records can provide insightful clues into the lives of ordinary people.

Finally, many scholars rely on *family reconstitution*, in which attempts are made to compile all available information about significant family events and everyday life. Members of each generation who are still alive are interviewed in depth, and they are asked to reconstruct their family history. Recreating the past is not easy. Historical researchers work as detectives and try to obtain the greatest number of sources possible as they reconstruct the past. Sometimes numerous sources are available, but unfortunately, sometimes only a few clues remain.

#### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. Think about your own family's history. How far back does your information reliably go? Who are the oldest members of your family? Could you conduct a family reconstitution?
2. If your books, magazines, computer, or other important artifacts were saved in a time capsule, what would someone a hundred years from now learn about you? About your lifestyle? About your relationships?

write, as well as the vocational and technical skills necessary to become productive adults.

- *Churches.* Families worshiped and prayed together in their homes because churches were usually far away. Parents and children read the Bible together, one of the few books and sources of moral instruction readily available.
- *Correctional institutions.* Jails were rare in colonial times, and therefore courts sentenced criminals and so-called idle people to live with more respected families in the community. These families were considered the best setting not only to impose discipline, but also to encourage reform.
- *Health and social welfare institutions.* Because there were no hospitals and few doctors during this period, families—and women in particular—took on the role of caring for the sick and infirm. Families also took care of the aging, the homeless, and orphans (Demos, 1970).

**nuclear family:** A family composed of adults and their children.

**extended family:** A family composed of parents, children, and other relatives such as grandparents.

Most people in colonial America lived in **nuclear families** composed of adults and their children. **Extended families**, including grandparents or other relatives, were the exception. Because couples tended to be relatively older at first marriage and people didn't live very long, older adults may have died before their grandchildren were born.

Families were large by today's standards, often containing six or more children. Siblings could be as much as 25 years apart in age. Husbands or wives may have married two or even three times because people died young (Laslett, 1971). Children often had stepsiblings or half-siblings. Some households also included servants or slaves, who were sometimes counted as household family members in statistical records.

Marriage and family were central events in people's lives. Although marriages were often arranged to further business or financial interests, husbands and wives considered themselves a team and anticipated that love and affection would develop between them. However, a wife was considered her husband's helpmate, but not his equal. The husband was the head of the family, and it was his wife's duty to obey him. Women had crucial economic roles inside and outside the family, including cooking, sewing, cleaning, gardening, and certain farm chores, and they produced many goods for the family. They raised and cared for many children. Husbands did the planting and harvesting, but women also helped at crucial times of the agricultural year.

Parents tended to be very strict with their children. They believed that children were born with "original sin" and needed firm discipline and severe religious training to break their innate rebellion and selfishness, and to ensure that children would grow up to be productive members of society. Excessive tenderness, they felt, could spoil the child. Children were treated as miniature adults; there was no concept of adolescence, as there is today. As soon as children were old enough to work on the family farm or in the household, they were put to work.

**COLONIAL AMERICA: AFRICAN AMERICANS AND SLAVERY** The first Africans forcefully brought over to the colonies were indentured servants, and after serving a specified amount of time they were considered "free" and able to marry and purchase their own land. But by the late 17th century, the slave trade was well underway, with a million Africans captured and brought to the American colonies against their will. Some prominent Americans, including Thomas Jefferson, primary author of the Declaration of Independence and the third U.S. President, publicly denounced slavery but supported it privately. In addition to owning slaves, it is now generally agreed that he fathered children with a slave named Sally Hemings (Gordon-Reed, 2008).

For years, slavery was used to explain the strong-female family patterns among contemporary Blacks; however, today, instead of seeing slave families as incomplete or emasculated, historians are noting the resiliency of slave families



(Sudarkasa, 1999; Wilkinson, 1997). African family ties were strong, and relationships created by “blood” were considered more important than those created by marriage (Gutman, 1976; Sudarkasa, 1999).

By the early 1800s, the United States prohibited the importation of new slaves, and owners began to recognize the value of encouraging family relationships and childbearing among the slaves they already owned. Some relationships were forced for “breeding” purposes; at other times, real love developed between slaves. Yet slave marriages were fragile; one study conducted in several southern states revealed that more than one-third of slave marriages were terminated by selling off either the husband or wife to another party elsewhere (Gutman, 1976). Even when slavery tore apart families, kinship bonds persisted. Children were often named after lost relatives as a way to preserve family ties.

Prior to the Civil War, there were approximately 150,000 free African Americans living in southern states, and another 100,000 living in the north (Mintz & Kellogg, 1989). Yet, even “free” African Americans weren’t necessarily allowed to vote, attend White schools and churches, or be hired for jobs. Consequently, many free African Americans were poor, unemployed, and barely literate. Moreover, free women outnumbered free men in urban areas. Together, high poverty rates and the gender imbalance among free African Americans made it challenging for them to marry and raise children. It’s therefore unsurprising that many children were reared in female-headed households. One study indicated that when property holdings, a key measure of income, were held constant, the higher incidence of one-parent families among African Americans largely disappeared (Mintz & Kellogg, 1989).

**INDUSTRIALIZATION, URBANIZATION, AND IMMIGRATION** Family life in the United States changed considerably in the 19th and early 20th centuries because of three primary factors. First, *industrialization* transformed the economy from a system based on small family farms to one of large urban industries. “Work” became something that people did away from the home. Increasingly more goods and services were produced for profit outside the home, and families purchased these with wages they earned at outside jobs.

Second, people started moving from rural areas and farms to urban areas in search of jobs, a process known as *urbanization*. This process tore extended families apart, as the vast distances between farm and city made frequent contact impossible.

Third, the large waves of *immigration*, in which people from Europe and Asia came to the United States with the hopes of a better life, provided the cheap labor that fueled this industrialization. Between 1830 and 1930, more than 30 million immigrants came to the United States from all over the world, including western Europe, the Slavic countries, and China. In packinghouses, steel mills, textile mills, coal mines, and a host of other industrial settings, nearly half the workers were immigrants to the United States (Steinberg, 1981).

### THE POOR AND WORKING CLASSES

Most immigrants were poor, or nearly so. Doris Weatherford, in her book *Foreign and Female: Immigrant Women in America, 1840–1930* (1986), and Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906) describe the appalling conditions in which many immigrant families lived and worked. Housing was crowded, substandard, and

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Immigrants to the United States in the 19th century were often poor and worked in the dangerous and dirty factories that characterized the Industrial Revolution.



often lacked appropriate sanitation facilities. Raw sewage was strewn about, causing rampant epidemics in immigrant neighborhoods. Early industrial working conditions were exceedingly dangerous, unsanitary, and inhumane, and many workers died or became disabled or disfigured. There were few safety mechanisms in place, the lighting and ventilation systems were woefully inadequate, and people routinely did hard manual labor for as many as 80 hours a week.

The strain of family life under these abysmal working and living conditions was severe and took its toll. Alcoholism, violence, crime, and other social problems stemming from demoralization plagued many families. Yet immigrants continued to crowd cities in search of work because they hoped it would eventually lead to a better life for their children.

**MIDDLE AND UPPER CLASSES** In the middle and upper classes, ideally the husband was the breadwinner while the wife reared the children and took care of the home. Children were no longer seen simply as miniature adults, perhaps because middle- and upper-class families no longer relied on their labor. Instead, children were seen as innocents who could be molded into good or bad citizens, a view that emphasized the important role that mothers played at home (Degler, 1980). Experts elevated women’s childrearing responsibilities and frowned on women working outside the home, because this was seen as taking women away from their primary, natural, and most important work—motherhood.

**THE RISE OF THE “MODERN” FAMILY—THE TWENTIETH CENTURY** The early to mid-1900s saw two World Wars, a Depression, and the relative affluence of the 1950s and 1960s, all of which had an impact on families. Families faced new and daunting hardships during the Depression with increased unemployment, poverty, and homelessness. The World Wars separated families, and many men were injured or killed on the battlefield. World War II ushered women into the labor market as never before; their employment was deemed a “patriotic duty.” After World War II and throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, women were encouraged to give up their wartime jobs to men returning from the battlefield, and many female workers were fired if they failed to resign voluntarily.

At the same time, technological innovations increased at a rapid pace. The popularity of the automobile changed the ways families traveled and increased their mobility. New suburban residential patterns and migration to the cities in search of work increased travel and commuting time and decreased the amount of time fathers spent with their families. Kitchen appliances were designed to reduce the amount of time women spent on domestic labor.

A **companionate family** emerged, one based on mutual affection, sexual attraction, compatibility, and personal happiness. Young adults freely dated without chaperones, and placed greater emphasis on romantic love and attraction in their search for mates as compared to their parents and grandparents.

In her influential book *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan, 1963), Betty Friedan documents a push toward domesticity during this period. Interviews with female college students revealed that their primary reason for attending college was to find a suitable husband rather than a career. College women who were unattached by their senior year thought they had failed in their ultimate mission—to get their “MRS. Degree.” Friedan’s content analyses of women’s magazines found that few women had jobs or careers; in fact, those who did were often portrayed as cold, aloof, and unfeminine. The “normal” or “natural” role for women was portrayed as a wife and helpmate to her husband, and eventually as a mother to a large number of children.

During this period, the average age at first marriage dropped to an all-time low since records had been kept—barely 19 for women and 20 for men—and the birth rate exploded. To keep up with the move toward domesticity, the federal government underwrote the construction of homes in the suburbs, undertook massive highway construction projects that enabled long commutes from home to work, and subsidized low-interest mortgage loans with minimal down

**companionate family:** A marriage based on mutual affection, sexual attraction, compatibility, and personal happiness.

payments for veterans. Families, growing in size, craved the spaciousness and privacy of the new suburbs where they could have their own yards instead of community parks for their children. In the suburbs, women cared for their children in isolation, volunteered in their children's schools and within the community, and chauffeured their children to various lessons and events. Television programs, women's magazines, and other media sources glorified the new domesticity, but in reality, this cultural image was not attainable for many families. Working-class and poor women, including many minority women, often worked full- or part-time because their husbands didn't earn enough to support the family. Nonetheless, this cultural image was a powerful one.

## Families Today

As we've seen from our look at family history, families are never isolated from outside events and the social structure in which they live. For example, the economy greatly affects family lifestyles, opportunities, and constraints. Over the past few decades, the U.S. economy has shifted from relatively high-paying manufacturing jobs to lower-paying jobs in the service sector, making it very difficult to support a family on one income; therefore, growing numbers of married women with children have returned to the labor market.

We also see evidence of increasing social inequality, and this, too, affects families. The rich have made tremendous gains during the past few decades, whereas the middle- and lower-income classes have experienced stagnation or a decline in real earnings when adjusted for inflation (Greenhouse, 2013). Middle-class families felt the squeeze of the recession most severely, and their recovery is coming more slowly than it has for the wealthy (Mishel & Finio, 2013). Although the economic forecast looks rosier than it did just a few years ago, unemployment still hovers around 7 percent at the end of 2013 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, November 20, 2013), and home foreclosures remains a problem (Christie, 2012).

Many workers are finding that temporary jobs with few benefits are the best available (Olson, 2011). Between one-third and one-half of workers have evening or weekend shifts, or they have rotating schedules, which can wreak havoc on families and childcare arrangements (Gornick, Presser, & Ratzdorf, 2009; Presser, 2003; Presser & Ward, 2011). Among couples with children, the risk of divorce increases up to six times when one spouse works between midnight and 8 A.M., as compared to working daytime hours. Both mothers and children whose mothers have nonstandard schedules are at great risk for depression, delinquency, or aggressive behaviors (Institute for Work & Health, 2010; Presser, 2003).

Many modern families have noticed that their purchasing power has steadily declined because their incomes have failed to keep up with inflation, a problem especially true for the lowest-income workers. The minimum wage doesn't allow parents to support their children adequately. Half of workers making the federal minimum wage are adults age 25 and older, often working in the service industry doing food preparation or serving (Bureau of Labor Statistics, March 2, 2012). Figure 1.1 illustrates the erosion in the value of the minimum wage, which is why some members of Congress propose raising it from \$7.25 to \$9.00 per hour (Mishel, 2013). In the late 1960s, the minimum wage equaled about one-half of the average hourly wage; today, the minimum wage is only 37 percent of the average hourly wage. This implies that the minimum wage hasn't kept pace with rising wages

 **Read on MySocLab**  
**Document:** *Beyond the Nuclear Family: The Increasing Importance of Multigenerational Bonds*

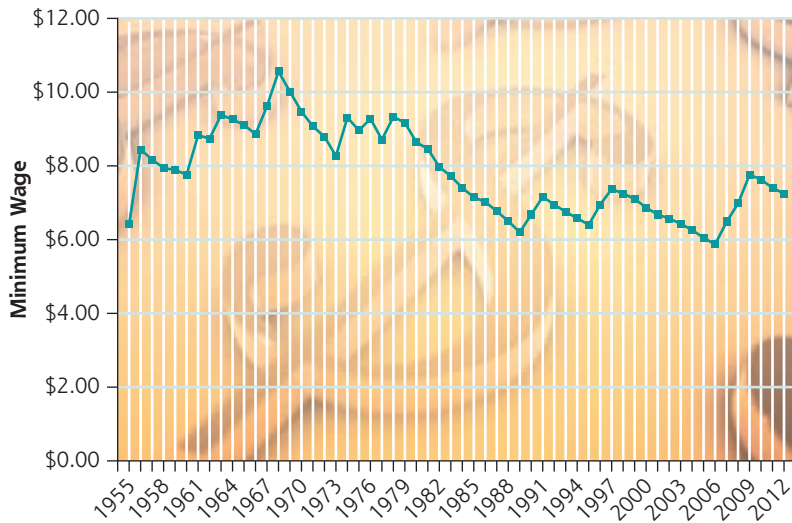
 **Read on MySocLab**  
**Document:** *Why American Families Need the Census*

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Many middle-class families have fallen on hard times during the current recession. Unemployment hovers around 8 percent, causing many families to lose their homes in foreclosure.







**FIGURE 1.1**  
**Inflation-Adjusted Value**  
**of the Minimum Wage,**  
**1955–2012, in 2012 Dollars**

The real value of the minimum wage declined until 2007, when the minimum wage was raised. However, its real value is starting to decline once again.

Source: Infoplease.com, 2012.

**I**n your conversations with your grandparents or other older adults about the “good old days,” what stories have you heard about family life? What information have you obtained about dating, marriage, or raising children? How is it similar or different from what you have learned in the history portion of this chapter?

**1.5** Summarize the importance of social science theory and research

### Questions That Matter

- 1.9 How does social science research help us understand families?
- 1.10 What methods do family scholars use to study families?
- 1.11 How can theory help us understand families and family research?
- 1.12 Are Americans rejecting marriage and families?

more generally. Not surprisingly, a small family trying to live on a minimum wage of \$7.25, which translates to an annual salary of \$14,500, is considered to be well below the poverty line (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2012).

In addition to lower real incomes, housing costs remain unaffordable for many people hoping to buy their first home. The average price of a single-family home in June 2009 was \$173,600 (National Association of Realtors, 2013), a slight increase since the height of the recession. Many Americans are still forced to rent. Nationally, a modest two-bedroom apartment averages \$900 a month, according to estimates from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). In fact, about 12 million households pay more than half of their income in housing

(HUD, 2013a). Affordable housing is a serious problem for millions: a family with one full-time worker earning minimum wage can’t afford to pay the fair market rate for an apartment anywhere in the United States. So, how do families cope with high housing costs? People who struggle to pay for housing are likely to reduce their spending on food, transportation, clothing, and other necessities (HUD, 2013b). Others who struggle with high housing costs become homeless. About 630,000 to 750,000 Americans are homeless on any given night, and 3.5 million are estimated to be homeless at some point over the course of a year (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2013; National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009).

Because of these increased expenses, many families today not only work longer hours, but also have both spouses employed full-time outside the home. Unfortunately, many still find themselves in alarming debt, as credit cards such as Visa, MasterCard, or American Express are tempting to people with economic difficulties.

In this brief review of historical and cross-cultural differences in family life, you can see that marriage, families, and close relationships are constructed by humans, and therefore their structures are not monolithic. Families are always changing and adapting to a wide variety of historical and cultural traditions.

What do American families look like today? The feature box “Diversity in Families: Profile of U.S. Families” draws on the U.S. Census as well as other government information to present key demographic facts about families today—at least as families are defined by the government.

## Theme 3: The Importance of Social Science Theory and Research

A third theme of this text is *an appreciation for the role that social science theory and research play in helping people understand families and close relationships*. Think for a moment about how you know what you know about families. We all have opinions about families based on our own experience or on information filtered through the mass media, our peers, our parents, religious teachings, or laws. Because virtually all of us were raised in families, we may feel that we are experts on the subject. In other words, we often just rely on our “common sense,” a combination of political, legal, social, economic, and religious norms!



What do families look like today? Let's examine some key statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, and other governmental sources that we discuss in more detail throughout the text. First, however, be aware that government statistics have some limitations. For example, they use catchall categories like "Hispanic" or "Asian," but these groups are far from homogeneous. Although Cuban Americans, Mexican Americans, and Puerto Ricans share a common language, their cultures are significantly different. Nonetheless, government statistics, although imperfect, offer an important source of demographic information about our population.

1. Both men and women are postponing marriage. Because of expanding opportunities and changing norms, women now marry at an average age of 25 years, compared to 21 years in 1970. Men now marry at an average age of 27 years, compared to 23 years in 1970.
2. Family size is shrinking. It's likely that nearly one in five women of childbearing age today will not have children, some by choice, and some because of infertility. Those who do have children are more likely to opt for just one or two.
3. The divorce rate has declined in recent decades. In the 1960s, the divorce rate began to rise rapidly, peaking around 1980, but since then it has steadily declined.
4. Single-parent households have been growing, particularly among men. Since 1970, there has been a 300 percent increase in single-parent households headed by mothers and a 500 percent increase in those headed by fathers. Today, about one-quarter of White families are headed by one parent, as are more than half of Black families and one-third of Hispanic families.
5. Mothers are increasingly likely to be employed outside the home. Today, this figure includes nearly two-thirds of mothers.
6. Hispanic groups are now the largest minority in the United States, at about 16 percent of the population. Because the birthrate and rate of immigration are higher among Hispanics than among other groups, their presence in the United States will continue to grow at a fast rate. By 2050, about 30 percent of all Americans will likely be of Hispanic descent.
7. The teenage birthrate has declined significantly since 1990. The birthrate among teenagers has declined by about 20 percent since that time. This decline is occurring among all racial and ethnic groups, although it has fluctuated in recent years.
8. Unmarried couples living together is common. The number of unmarried couples has almost doubled since 2000



Hispanics are now the largest minority group in the United States. By the year 2050, they may make up nearly one-third of the population. How will this change American culture?

to nearly 7 million today. This trend is found among all age groups, including the elderly.

9. The percentage of people living in poverty has fluctuated in conjunction with economic trends and is now rising. Poverty rates among families, single adults, and children were down in the 1990s; however, since then, poverty rates have risen. Today, about 14 percent of Americans live in poverty, including more than 20 percent of children.
10. The elderly population has been increasing almost four times as fast as the population as a whole. In 1900, only a small portion of people—one in 25—were age 65 or older. This has certainly changed. Moreover, people age 85 and older—referred to as the *oldest old*—are the fastest growing elderly cohort in the United States.

#### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. What other changes do you see occurring in families? Do you think these changes are for the better or for the worse? Why?
2. Do you think that any of these trends will be reversed over the next decade? If so, what will cause them to be reversed?

However, a scientific perspective can provide a more objective window on the world because common sense differs from one place to another, and from one point in time to another. The norms that underlie so-called common sense can also change. Instead, social science research can inform us about the structure of families, the experiences people have within them, and the meanings that they attach to their relationships. Research offers a firmer basis on which to form opinions and choose our values. After all, common sense allowed men to beat their wives throughout most of our history, because women were considered inferior. Today it's against the law in the United States (and many other countries) for husbands to beat their wives (and vice versa).



Social science research can tell us a lot about social problems, including how to create programs and policies to best serve vulnerable people.

**empirical approach:** An approach that answers questions through a systematic collection and analysis of data.

However, violence among intimates isn't illegal in many parts of the world. In certain countries, both husbands and wives believe that violence can be justified, and it's the husband's prerogative to beat his wife. A World Health Organization study of 24,000 women in ten countries found that the prevalence of physical and/or sexual violence by a partner varied from 15 percent in urban Japan to 71 percent in rural Ethiopia, with most areas being in the 30 percent to 60 percent range (World Health Organization, 2009).

If so-called common sense is subject to historical and cultural whims, then what can we depend on to help us understand family dynamics? Sociologists and other family scientists use an **empirical approach**, which answers questions through a systematic

collection and analysis of data. Uncovering patterns of family dynamics can be extremely important for building stronger families.

The goals of family research can (e.g., in the case of violence among intimates)

- *describe* some phenomenon (e.g., how many women have been physically assaulted by someone close to them; how this compares to the number of men who are assaulted by their partners each year), or
- *examine the factors that predict or are associated with* some phenomenon (e.g., what factors are associated with violence among intimates; what factors predict whether a victim will report the assault to the police), or
- *explain the cause-and-effect relationships* or provide insight into why certain events do or do not occur (e.g., the relationship between alcohol and violence among intimates; the relationship between attitudes of male dominance and domestic violence), or
- *examine the meanings and interpretations* of some phenomenon (e.g., how abused women and men interpret the reasons for the assault, what the label "victim" means, and how that meaning might differ for women and men)

Because of research, we know that violence among intimates is a serious and pervasive social problem. Nearly one in four women in the United States report being physically assaulted by someone close to them (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2011). How can social science research help women who are battered by their partners? Family scholars conduct basic and applied research to understand the phenomenon, striving to reveal information about the incidence, predictors, social factors associated with violence, or the experience of violence that psychologists, social workers, and politicians could use to develop programs to prevent violence, assist victims, and treat the perpetrators. Violence among intimates is a social problem, not simply an individual one, and research can uncover the social patterns that underlie it.

## How Do We Know What We Know? Methods of Social Research

Family scientists use a number of different methods to collect and analyze data systematically. Provided here is a brief introduction to six primary ways of collecting data, and Table 1.2 (p. 23) summarizes these methods. Throughout this text, you will see these research methods in action.

**TABLE 1.2 Six Research Methods: A Summary***Family researchers use a variety of methods to learn about families and close relationships.*

<b>Method</b>	<b>Application</b>	<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Limitations</b>
<b>Survey</b>	For gathering information about issues that are not directly observed, such as values, opinions, and other self-reports. Can be administered by mail, telephone, or in person. Useful for descriptive or explanatory purposes; can generate quantitative or qualitative data.	Sampling methods can allow researcher to generalize findings to a larger population. Can provide open-ended questions or a fixed response.	Surveys must be carefully prepared to avoid bias. A potential for a low return or response rate. Can be expensive and time-consuming. Self-reports may be biased.
<b>In-depth Interview</b>	For obtaining information about issues that are not directly observed, such as values, opinions, and other self-reports. Useful for getting in-depth information about a topic. Conducted in person, conversation is usually audiotaped and later transcribed. Generates qualitative data.	Can provide detailed and high-quality data. Interviewer can probe or ask follow-up questions for clarification or to encourage the respondent to elaborate. Can establish genuine rapport with respondent.	Expensive and time-consuming to conduct and transcribe. Self-reports may be biased. Respondent may feel uncomfortable revealing personal information.
<b>Experiment</b>	For explanatory research that examines cause-and-effect relationship among variables. Several types: Classical Experimental Design and Quasi-experimental Designs based on degree of controlling the environment. Generates quantitative data.	Provides greatest opportunity to assess cause and effect. Research design is relatively easy to replicate.	The setting may have an artificial quality. Unless experimental and control groups are randomly assigned or matched on all relevant variables and the environment is carefully controlled, bias may result.
<b>Focus Group</b>	For obtaining information from small groups of people who are brought together to discuss a particular topic. Often exploratory in nature. Particularly useful for studying public perceptions. Facilitator may ask only a few questions; goal is to get group to interact with one another. Generates qualitative data.	Group interaction may produce more valuable insights than individual surveys or in-depth interviews. Research can obtain data quickly and inexpensively. Good at eliciting unanticipated information.	Setting is contrived. Some people may feel uncomfortable speaking in a group, and others may dominate.
<b>Observational Study</b>	For exploratory and descriptive study of people in a natural setting. Researcher can be a participant or nonparticipant. Generates qualitative data.	Allows study of real behavior in a natural setting. Does not rely on self-reports. Researchers can often ask questions and take notes. Usually inexpensive.	Can be time-consuming. Could be ethical issues involved in certain types of observation studies (i.e., observing without consent). Researcher must balance roles of participant and observer. Replication of research is difficult.
<b>Secondary Analysis</b>	For exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory research with data that were collected for some other purpose. Diverse. Can be large data sources based on national samples (e.g., U.S. Census) or can be historical documents or records. Generates quantitative or qualitative data, depending on the source of data used.	Saves the expense and time of original data collection. Can be longitudinal, with data collected at more than one point in time. Good for analyzing national attitudes or trends. Makes historical research possible.	Because data were collected for another purpose, the researcher has no control over what variables were included or excluded. Researcher has no control over sampling or other biases in the data.

**survey:** A form of research that gathers information about attitudes or behaviors through the answers that people give to questions.

**random sample:** A sample in which every “person of interest” has an equal chance of being selected into your research study.

A **survey** is used to gather information about attitudes or behaviors through the answers that people give to questions. You’ve probably completed many surveys throughout your life. They’re a popular research method because they can cover most topics from politics to sexuality to consumer marketing. If used correctly, a survey can produce results that can be generalized to the population.

A **random sample** is the key to being able to generalize your survey findings. A random sample allows every “person of interest” an equal chance of being selected for your research study. For example, let’s say we wanted to survey registered voters to see how they felt about same-sex marriage. If we put every registered voter’s name “in a hat” (or more likely, enter it into a computer program), and randomly chose 1,500 names, we could say that we had a representative sample. Or, let’s say we wanted to survey college seniors at your university about their experiences with cohabitation. We could easily get a list of college seniors from the administration and randomly select 150 of them to survey.

However, in many contexts, finding a complete list of everyone of interest is impossible. Suppose that we wanted to survey people who have had a same-sex experience, or men who plan to remain virgins until married, or teenagers who don’t get along with their parents. Where would we find a complete list of persons of interest for these surveys? Sometimes, we need to use other sampling strategies. For example, perhaps I can identify a young man who plans to remain a virgin until marriage, and he can introduce me to others who share this value, who then each introduce me to even more people. This is called a *snowball sample* as the list grows larger.

Surveys can be performed in a number of ways, including *mail surveys*, which are self-administered questions that are mailed to respondents. A mail survey may be appropriate if the number of questions is short and the questions themselves are simple, such as, “How many children do you have?” or, “Do you smoke more than one cigarette a day?” However, if the questions require too much detail, respondents are unlikely to complete the survey on their own and simply throw it away.

With a telephone survey, an interviewer calls respondents and asks them the questions over the telephone. These are becoming increasingly popular, but many people find them annoying and hang up immediately. However, if the interviewer can keep the person on the line, telephone surveys can be a quick and effective means of gathering information.

In-person surveys are done in a conversational setting. The interviewer asks a series of questions that the respondent answers. Because they’re sitting down together, the interviewer may be free to probe further or clarify anything that may be confusing to the respondent. This type of survey can work very well unless the topic is extremely sensitive and embarrassing, such as surveys on sexuality, for which the respondent may want a bit more privacy.

**In-depth interviews** are also conducted in person, and allow an interviewer to obtain detailed responses to questions such as, “How does your family cope when there is not enough food to eat?” or, “What does it mean to you to be a father?” Sometimes the questions follow a set pattern and every respondent is asked the same questions in the same order. Other in-depth interviews follow a different approach, where every interview is a conversation. The basic issues are covered, but much of the interview is emergent. The interviewer, with permission, records the interview, and later transcribes it verbatim.

An **experiment** is a controlled method for determining cause and effect. It’s often used in evaluation research or psychological research, which may ask such questions as, “Does abstinence-based sex education reduce teenage sexual activity?” or, “Does premarital counseling reduce the likelihood of divorce?”

There are many different types of experimental designs. The classical experimental design randomly divides individuals into two groups: an experimental group and a control group. The researchers might administer a pre-test to each group to ensure that the groups are similar and to use the information as a baseline to assess any future changes. Then, the researchers introduce a stimulus to

**in-depth interview:** A research method that allows an interviewer to obtain detailed responses to questions.

**experiment:** A controlled method for determining cause and effect.



the experimental group, such as the abstinence-based sex education program or the premarital counseling program. The control group does not receive the stimulus. Then, the two groups are compared again, referred to as the *post-test*. If there is a difference in the two groups, it's assumed that it was caused by the stimulus. We can say that the stimulus caused the effect. Experiments work well for certain types of questions, but not for all.

A **focus group** obtains information from a small group of people who are brought together to discuss a particular topic. It's a group interview and works well when a researcher is looking for exploratory information. The moderator may have only a few questions. The goal is to get the group members to interact, brainstorm, and exchange ideas with one another: "What types of responses have you had to your interracial relationship?" or, "Have you found online dating to be a worthwhile experience?" The researcher may then use ideas generated in focus groups to develop other types of research plans.

**Observational studies** go to the natural setting and observe people in action. A researcher may observe children in a daycare center to answer the question, "How do four-year-old boys and girls express gender?" Or a researcher may visit nursing homes to answer the question, "How do nursing home staff treat people with Alzheimer's disease?" Researchers can be *participant observers*, meaning that they actively participate in the group they are studying. They may even go undercover and pretend to be a staff member while watching others in the nursing home, or they may take a teacher's aide job to watch the children more thoroughly. Other researchers are *non-participants*, in which case the researcher may simply stand by, watch, and take notes. These non-participant researchers may observe children through a two-way mirror, or they may walk around the nursing home, jotting down their observations.

Finally, many researchers rely on **secondary analysis**. This means that the data were collected for some other purpose, but still prove useful to the researcher. These can be large sources of data from the U.S. Census Bureau or the U.S. Department of Justice to answer questions across the population such as, "How many single-parent households are poor?" or, "What were the racial and ethnic backgrounds of crime victims last year?" We can also conduct secondary analyses using other, smaller sources of data. The hallmark is that you're using data collected by someone else for a different purpose. Although this is the least expensive method, it often means you must compromise your study because the original researchers may not have collected the data in exactly the same way you would have.

As you can see from these various research methods, some researchers focus on **quantitative research**, where the focus is on data that can be measured numerically, such as "28 percent of college seniors regret the choice of their major" (by the way, I just made that up). Examples of quantitative research might be found in surveys, experiments, or doing a secondary analysis on available statistics from a government agency or some other source. Others use **qualitative research** and focus on narrative description with words rather than numbers to analyze patterns and their underlying meanings. "How do college seniors feel toward their chosen major? Several themes emerged. . . ." Examples of qualitative research methods include in-depth interviews, focus groups, observation studies, or conducting a secondary analysis using narrative documents (such as letters or diaries).

None of these research methods is inherently better or worse than the others. The method used depends on the research questions raised. For example, if we want to better understand what family life was like in the 19th century, we wouldn't conduct a survey. How would people who are alive today best inform us of what happened 200 years ago? The best method would be to conduct a secondary analysis of documents written during that time period. Diaries, letters, or other lengthy correspondence between people of that time period could help us understand the common everyday experiences between families. Historical records could give us a picture of immigration trends, age at first marriage, or the average length of time between marriage and first birth.

**focus group:** A small group interview of people who are brought together to discuss a particular topic.

**observational study:** A research method that goes into the natural setting and observes people in action.

**secondary analysis:** A research method in which the data were collected for some other purpose but still are useful to the researcher.


**quantitative research:** Research that focuses on data that can be measured numerically.

**qualitative research:** Narrative description with words rather than numbers to analyze patterns and their underlying meanings.

However, if we're trying to assess attitudes or opinions about people today, perhaps a survey or in-depth interviews would be best. If we want to ask the same questions of everyone and offer a standard set of answers from which they can choose from, such as "How many children do you personally want to have? Would you say it is zero, one, two, three, four, or five or more?" then a survey might be best. We can easily quantify the information and present it with statistics. We could look at multiple factors, such as how the number of children desired affects the likelihood of attending graduate school, and how that might differ for men and women. Or, if we're interested in broader questions and want each person in our study to elaborate on their answers in his or her own way, such as, "How did you decide on the number of children that you would like to have?" or "How do you think children may affect your career plans?" we would likely use in-depth interviews, which yield qualitative data.

## Theories: Helping Us Make Sense of the World

**theory:** A general framework, explanation, or tool used to understand and describe the real world.

 **Watch on MySocLab**  
**Video:** *Sociological Theory and Research: The Basics*

Research is guided by **theory**, which is a general framework, explanation, or tool used to understand and describe the real world (Smith & Hamon, 2012). Theories are important both before and after data have been collected because they help us decide what topics to research, what questions to try to answer, how best to answer them, and how to interpret the research results. Before collecting data, theories can help us frame the question. When data have been collected and patterns emerge, theories can help us make sense of what was found.

There are many theoretical perspectives that make different assumptions about the nature of society. Table 1.3 summarizes the most common theories for

**TABLE 1.3** Summary of Family Theories

*Theories range from macro-level to micro-level.*



LEVEL OF ANALYSIS			
MACRO	Structural Functionalism	↔	The family as an institution and how it functions to maintain its own needs and those of society.
	Conflict	↔	Social inequality results in unequal resources resulting in inevitable conflict.
	Feminism	↔	Investigation of family life as experienced by those with minority status, especially women.
	Biosocial	↔	The reciprocal roles of nature and environment in shaping family behavior.
MICRO	Social Exchange	↔	Family life as a rational exchange designed to maximize rewards and contain costs.
	Symbolic Interaction	↔	Family interaction governed by symbolic communication that defines reality.
	Developmental Theory	↔	Family life predicted by passage through normative stages and the accomplishment of corresponding tasks.
	Family Systems	↔	Circular interactions among the system members resulting in functional or dysfunctional outcomes.
	Stress	↔	Analysis of the process of experiencing and resolving stressful life events.

Source: Ingoldsby, Smith, & Miller, 2004.

studying families. Some theories are more macro in nature, and attempt to understand societal patterns; these include structural functionalism theory, conflict theory, and feminist theory. Other theories are more micro in nature, such as social exchange theory, symbolic interaction theory, developmental theory, and systems theory, and focus on personal dynamics and face-to-face interaction.

**STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALISM** The **structural functionalism theory** (often shortened to *functionalism*) attempts to determine the structure, systems, functions, and equilibrium of social institutions—in this case, the family. A popular theory in the 1940s and 1950s, the focus is on how the family is organized, how it interacts with other social systems, the functions that the family serves, and how it is a stabilizing force in a culture (Parsons, 1937). For example, Parsons and Bales (1955) focused on the division of labor in families, noting the ways in which separate spheres for men and women contributed to the stability and functionality of families. The expressive roles and tasks fell to women, whereas the instrumental roles fell to men, which contributed to smooth family functioning. Functionalists rarely note the tensions, conflicts, or the political ideologies behind their ideas, which may explain why it has fallen out of favor in recent decades among sociologists.

**CONFLICT THEORY** **Conflict theory** emphasizes issues surrounding social inequality, power, conflict, and social change; in this case, how these factors influence or are played out in families. Those who follow the writings of Karl Marx, a 19th-century philosopher, focus on the consequences of capitalism for families, such as the tensions and inequality generated by the distribution of wealth and power associated with capitalism (Marx & Engels, 1971, original 1867). Other conflict theorists focus on a broader array of issues surrounding conflict, inequality, or power differentials. For example, a conflict theorist might ask why virtually all elderly persons, regardless of income, receive government-subsidized health care that covers many of their health care needs (Medicare) when there is no similar program for children. Is this difference in treatment because the elderly represent both a large special interest group and a powerful voting block, whereas children as a group are virtually powerless?

**FEMINIST THEORY** **Feminist theory** is related to conflict theory, but the difference between the two is that gender is seen as the central concept for explaining family structure and family dynamics (Osmond & Thorne, 1993). It focuses on the inequality and power imbalances between men and women and analyzes “women’s subordination for the purpose of figuring out how to change it” (Gordon, 1979, p. 107). It recognizes that *gender* is a far more important organizing concept than is *sex* because the former represents a powerful set of relations that are fraught with power and inequality. For example, research indicates that women do more household labor than men even when both partners are employed full-time. Feminist theorists see the gendered division of household labor as a result of power imbalances between men and women that are embedded in larger society and have virtually taken on a life of their own. This is an example of *doing gender* when gender differences become embedded in our culture (West & Zimmerman, 1987). We discuss this further in Chapter 10.

**SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY** **Social exchange theory** draws on a model of human behavior used by many economists. It assumes that individuals are rational beings, and their behavior reflects decisions evaluated on the basis of costs—both direct and opportunity costs—and benefits (Becker, 1981; Nye, 1979). Exchange theorists might suggest that a particular type of family structure or dynamic is the result of rational decisions based on evaluating the social, economic, and emotional costs and benefits compared to the alternatives.

 **Watch on MySocLab**  
**Video:** *Sociological Theory and Research: The Big Picture*

**structural functionalism theory:** A theory that attempts to determine the structure, systems, functions, and equilibrium of social institutions.

**conflict theory:** A theory that emphasizes issues surrounding social inequality, power, conflict, and social change.

**feminist theory:** A theory in which gender is seen as the central concept for explaining family structure and family dynamics.

**social exchange theory:** A theory that draws on a model of human behavior used by many economists. It assumes that individuals are rational beings, and their behavior reflects decisions evaluated on the basis of costs—both direct and opportunity costs—and benefits.

**symbolic interaction theory:** A theory that emphasizes the symbols we use in everyday interaction—words, gestures, appearances—and how these are interpreted.

**developmental theory:** A theory that suggests families and individual family members go through distinct stages over time, with each stage having its own set of tasks, roles, and responsibilities.

**systems theory:** A theory that proposes that a family system—the family members and the roles that they play—is larger than the sum of its individual members.

**SYMBOLIC INTERACTION THEORY** Symbolic interaction theory emphasizes the symbols we use in everyday interaction—words, gestures, appearances—and how these are interpreted by others (Mead, 1935). Our interactions with others are based on how we interpret these symbols. Some symbols are obvious—an engagement ring, a kiss, a smile. We know how to interpret these symbols. Others are less obvious and may be more confusing to interpret, thereby causing tension or conflict in a relationship. For example, we have a general agreement about what a “mother” is supposed to do, but what is the role of a “stepmother”?

**DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY** Developmental theory suggests that families (and individual family members) go through distinct stages over time, with each stage having its own set of tasks, roles, and responsibilities. These developmental changes include (1) getting married; (2) having children; (3) experiencing the preschool years; (4) experiencing the school-age years; (5) living with teenagers; (6) launching one’s children into adulthood; (7) being a middle-age parent; and (8) aging (Duvall & Miller, 1985). Early development theorists claimed that the stages were inevitable and occurred in a relatively linear fashion, although most now recognize that people might move in unpredictable ways. For example, some families never have children. Other families have children later in life, so that parents may face tasks associated with middle age (such as saving for retirement) before children are launched. Developmental theory uses both micro and macro approaches to describe and explain family relationships and stages (Rodgers & White, 1993).

A related perspective, called the life course perspective, examines how the lives of individuals change as they pass through events, with the recognition that many changes are socially produced and shared among a cohort of people (Elder, 1998; Schaie & Elder, 2005). For example, sociologist Glen Elder’s longitudinal study followed a cohort of American children through the Great Depression and afterward to see how a historical event of such large proportions affected them (Elder, 1999).

**SYSTEMS THEORY** A system is more than the sum of its parts. Likewise, systems theory proposes that a *family system*—the family members and the roles that they play—is larger than the sum of its individual members (Broderick & Smith, 1979). Collectively it becomes a system, but it also includes subsystems within it, such as the married couple subsystem, the sibling subsystem, or the parent–child subsystem. All family systems and subsystems create boundaries between them and the environment with varying degrees of permeability. They also create *rules of transformation* so that families function smoothly and everyone knows what to expect from another member. All systems tend toward equilibrium so that families work toward a balancing point in their relationship, and they maintain this equilibrium by feedback or control. Therefore, systems theory is particularly useful in studying how the family (or subsystems within the family) communicate with one another and the rippling effects of that communication.

Throughout this text you’ll read about and analyze the results of many scientific research studies and see how theory informs our research. These studies are important, because they show us relevant facts and meanings associated with families and close relationships. Understanding these facts and meanings helps shape our choices and our values. Next, let’s look at a detailed example of how research can inform our values about families.

## Family Decline or Not? What Does the Research Reveal?

Today, some people are concerned that the family is in trouble (National Marriage Project, 2012), citing “the neglect of marriage,” “lack of commitment by men,” “loss of child centeredness,” “the rise in cohabitation,” and “fatherless




families.” Popular television shows, newspapers, and magazines bombard us with stories about the demise of the family. We hear that in the “good old days,” there were fewer problems; life was easier, family bonds were stronger, families had more authority to fulfill their functions, and people were generally happier. People who believe that families are being threatened worry that (1) Americans are rejecting traditional marriage and family life; (2) family members are not adhering to roles within families; and (3) many social and moral problems result from the changes in families.

In contrast to this pessimistic perspective, others remind us that these golden years of the past never really existed. They argue that families have always faced challenges, including desertion, poverty, children born out of wedlock, alcoholism, unemployment, violence, and child abuse (Abramovitz, 1996; Coontz, 1997, 2000). Yet, despite these recurring problems, attempts to strengthen families through improved social services and financial assistance have been met with resistance. Providing families with services such as adequate child care, educational opportunities, jobs, health care, and housing is at odds with the emphasis in the United States on so-called rugged individualism. Instead, we are a nation that encourages all of our citizens to “pull themselves up by their own bootstraps.”

Which view is correct? To answer this question, we return to the third theme of this text: Rather than relying on common sense or personal experience alone to inform us about families, we should examine the information that research can provide. For example, you shouldn’t make sweeping statements that divorce is good or bad for children, that women on welfare neglect or don’t neglect their children, that teenage pregnancy is increasing or decreasing, or that lesbians or gay men make bad or good parents on the basis of your personal opinion without looking at what research reveals about these issues. You may find that your own opinions are confirmed—or, conversely, that they’re clearly refuted.

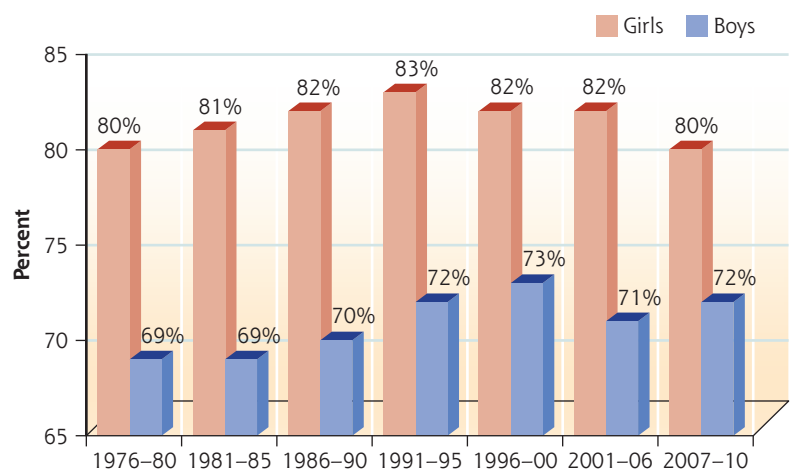
 **Explore on MySocLab**  
**Activity:** *Family Diversity: Who Takes Care of Whom?*

 **Read on MySocLab**  
**Document:** *The Way We Weren’t: The Myth and Reality of the Traditional Family*

## Are We Rejecting Marriage and Family Relationships? Attitudes

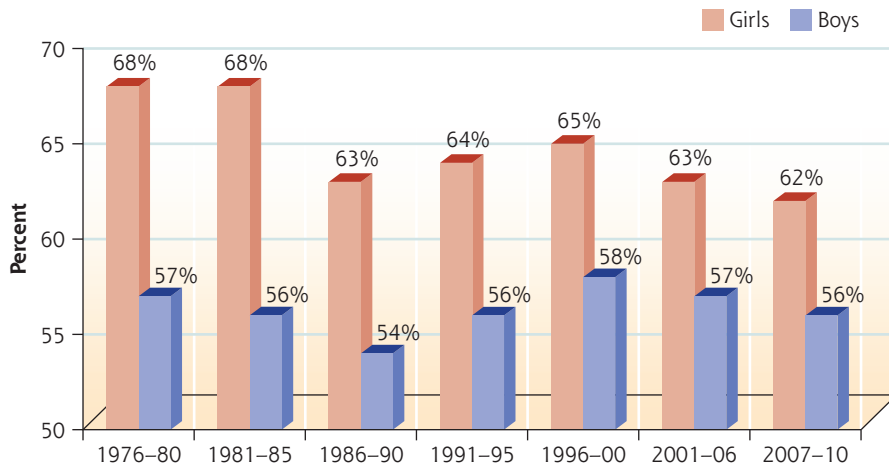
Studies looking at attitudes toward family life over the course of several decades show both change and consistency over time. A national Gallup Poll reveals a long-term trend toward endorsing sex and gender equality and a greater tolerance for different types of families and lifestyles, including same-sex marriage (Gallup, December 17, 2012; Pew Research Center, February 7, 2013). Nonetheless, there is also a continued emphasis on and commitment to marriage, children, and family life. Both younger and older Americans devote or plan to devote much of their lives to children and spouses. They see marriage as a lifetime commitment that shouldn’t be terminated except under extreme conditions, and they view both marriage and having children as highly fulfilling. There is no evidence that this commitment has eroded over the past several decades.

Researchers from the University of Michigan collected data from high school seniors since the mid-1970s and the results indicate very little, if any, decline in the way young people value marriage and family in the last generation (National Marriage Project, 2012). Figure 1.2 reports the percentage of high school



**FIGURE 1.2**  
**High School Seniors Who Said Having a Good Marriage and Family Life Is “Extremely Important”**

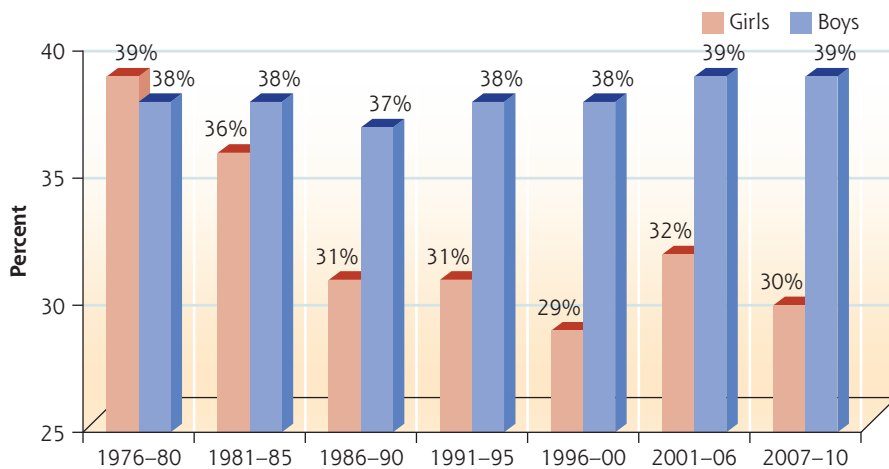
Both young men and women believe in the importance of a good marriage and family life, and opinions haven’t changed much since the mid-1970s. *Source:* The National Marriage Project, *The State of Our Unions: Marriage in America 2012*.



**FIGURE 1.3**  
**High School Seniors Who Expected to Marry, or Were Married, Who Said It Is “Very Likely” They Will Stay Married to the Same Person for Life, by Period**

Attitudes toward the permanence of marriage among young men and women have changed very little since the mid-1970s.

Source: The National Marriage Project, *The State of Our Unions: Marriage in America 2012*.



**FIGURE 1.4**  
**High School Seniors Who Said They Agreed or Mostly Agreed That Most People Will Have Fuller and Happier Lives If They Choose Legal Marriage Rather than Staying Single or Just Living with Someone**

Young women today see more options for themselves than did young women more than 30 years ago.

Source: The National Marriage Project, *The State of Our Unions: Marriage in America 2012*.

seniors over time who said that having a good marriage and family life is “Extremely Important.” Most young men and women strongly believe in the importance of a good marriage and family life. It appears that the opinions of young men and women in recent years are no different from those who graduated between 1986 and 1990.

The majority of high school seniors also agree that it’s “Very Likely” that they will stay married to the same person for life, as Figure 1.3 shows. Young women are more likely than their male counterparts to agree with this statement, and students’ attitudes have changed little over time.

Figure 1.4 reports the percentage of high school seniors who said they agreed, or mostly agreed, that “Most people will have fuller or happier lives if they choose legal marriage rather than staying single or just living with someone.” Again, the researchers compared the answers across different cohorts of high school seniors. Despite the fact that young people value marriage and family life for themselves and hope to stay married forever, they are also becoming more tolerant of other lifestyle options. Interestingly, young men are somewhat more likely than young women to believe that most people will have happier lives if they choose legal marriage. Young women in particular increasingly recognize that cohabitation and singlehood could indeed be viable options for people, even if they themselves would prefer to marry.

## Are We Rejecting Marriage and Family Relationships? Behaviors

Data from the U.S. Census Bureau show that the percentage of people who are currently married has declined. But is it fair to assume that we’re rejecting marriage and family relationships? Figure 1.5 (p. 32) shows the marital status of the population age 15 and older by gender for the years 1970 and 2012. First, note that the percentage of people older than 15 who had “Never Married” has risen for both men and women since the 1980s. However, this increase is primarily the result of the *delayed age at marriage*, not an increased likelihood of remaining single over the life course. Women now marry at an average age of 25 and men marry around age 27, compared to 21 and 23, respectively, in 1970. In fact, the percentage of people age 65 and over who report never

The holidays are coming up and I've made my usual plans to drive down from Boston to see my family in Maryland. I haven't seen my parents, kid sisters, and grandma for about six months, so it will be great to see them all again. That is, until they start up on the "single thing."

What is it with the older generations, anyway? I'm 31, and they act like my life is nothing without a husband and kids. Last time I saw my mom she actually cried, and told me that if I don't hurry and get married, no one will be left for me. I'm too picky, she said. Another time she suggested that my eggs were "drying up" and I was sentencing myself to a life without children. My dad isn't much better, and grandma just smirks.

What they don't seem to understand is that I like being single right now. I have a great job in publishing, and enjoy the perks



An increasing number of people in their 20s and 30s are single, using this opportunity to focus on their work, education, and their social life, but this does not mean that they will never marry.

of a pretty good salary, a wonderful loft in a cool part of town, lots of travel, and the freedom to take some terrific vacations. Last year, I went to Morocco and Egypt with a friend for three weeks. I'm not sure I could swing any of this with a husband and kids.

Of course, this doesn't mean that I never want to get married, or never want to have a baby. Okay, I admit that sometimes I'm lonely. Sometimes I do wonder if "he" is out there for me. I'm just not in any rush. I've had a few serious boyfriends. In college I even lived with my boyfriend for a couple of years, but then we split. He moved for a job and I left for graduate school, and we just realized we were going in different directions emotionally as well as geographically.

Right now I feel like I have a lot of friends, male and female, and we enjoy hanging out on weekends—you know, going out for dinner and drinks, sailing, or going to the latest gallery opening. I'm also training for a half-marathon, and have a good group of folks for my long run on Sundays.

My parents get none of this. "Hurry up, hurry up," they say. It bothers me because, sure, I want to get married, someday, just not yet.

—Mariah, Age 31

#### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. What age do you think is ideal to marry? The average age for first marriage is increasing. Do you think delaying marriage is good or bad for society?
2. Is the pressure to marry and have children the same for men and women? Would Mariah have received more or less pressure if she were a man? Explain your answer.

marrying is actually lower than it was in 1970. In other words, *people are still marrying, but marrying later*. So, although the statistics may first look like a rejection of marriage, a closer look reveals that this isn't the case, as shown in the feature box "My Family: Not Married—Yet."

Figure 1.5 also reveals that between 1970 and 2013, the number of people who claimed to be currently divorced or separated more than doubled for both men and women. Divorce was rising in the 1970s for many reasons that we explore in Chapter 12. However, the divorce rate began to level off in the early 1980s and has declined significantly since then (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], February 19, 2013). In other words, *divorce is declining, not increasing*. If you consider the fact that most divorced people eventually remarry, it's difficult to make the argument that Americans are rejecting marriage and family life.

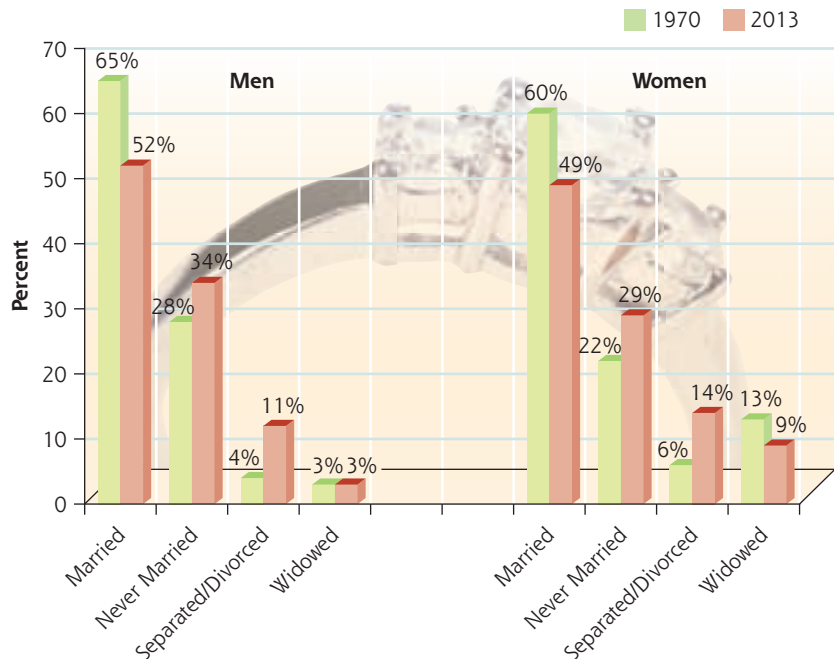
Other national data show that an increasing number of adults don't have children. Today, about 18 percent of women approaching the end of their childbearing years are childfree, double the rate of only a generation ago (Livingston & Cohn, 2010; Martinez, Daniels, & Chandra, 2012). Although you might conclude that our society is deciding against having children, it's important to understand that about half of childfree women ages 40–44 are *involuntarily* childfree, and assisted reproductive technology is big business these days (CDC, February 13, 2013).

**FIGURE 1.5**

**Marital Status of the Population 15 Years and Over, by Sex: 1970 and 2013**

Although it seems that fewer people are married and more people never marry, this reflects a delay in the age at marriage, not a rejection of marriage itself.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, November 2013.



Nonetheless, it remains that more women today than a generation ago choose to forgo parenthood. But let’s ask ourselves, is that such a bad thing? In the past, many women who didn’t want children were pressured to have them anyway. In other words, although fewer people are having children, we really don’t know *whether the percentage of people who don’t want children has increased or remained the same.*

Finally, some people consider the rise in the number of single-parent households to be a cause for concern. Single-parent households, which are about 30 percent of all families (Lofquist, Lugaila, O’Connell, & Feliz, 2012), have been blamed for a variety of family problems, including poverty, delinquency, teen pregnancy, and school dropouts. Most single-parent households are headed by single mothers; however, the composition of single-mother families is beginning to change. They are increasingly made up of older, more highly educated women, whereas the number of births by teenagers has been declining significantly, and has now reached an all-time low since data collection began in the 1940s (Hamilton & Ventura, 2012). In addition, the number of single-mother households has not increased appreciably since the mid-1990s; rather, it’s the number of *single-father* families that is on the rise.

Let’s pause to consider why so many single-parent households are vulnerable to a variety of social problems. Most studies do not find that it’s single parenthood *per se* that accounts for these problems. Rather, other issues *associated* with single parenthood seem to be responsible, such as an increased likelihood of poverty. Almost a third of single, female-headed households are poor, compared to only about 13 percent of all families (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2013). In other words, single parenthood may make poverty more likely to occur, but if we could do something to help fight poverty as a society, then many social problems could be reduced.

An international comparison may shed some light on what could be done to eliminate poverty and improve outcomes for children who grow up in single-parent households (Ermisch, Jantti, & Smeeding, 2012; Garfinkel, Rainwater, & Smeeding, 2010; Warner, 2005). For

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**Video:** Arlene Skolnick: Newest Debate in Family Studies

**W**hat are some common-sense assumptions about the family? Can you think of examples of family issues that you assumed to be true, but then you later learned the facts that showed you were wrong? How did you respond to this new information? Did you welcome, deny, or accept it immediately?



example, Houseknecht and Sastry (1996) examined the relationship between the decline of traditional families and the well-being of children in Sweden, the United States, the former West Germany, and Italy. *Family decline* was measured by such factors as the divorce rate, the rate of nonmarital births, and the percentage of mothers with young children in the labor force. *Child well-being* was measured by the percentage of children in poverty, deaths of infants from abuse, and juvenile delinquency rates. The researchers found that children seemed to fare best in both Italy and Sweden. But interestingly, Italy had low levels of family decline, whereas Sweden had significantly higher levels. Thus, it appears that changes in family structure don't necessarily have negative effects on children.

Why did Italy, with low levels of family decline, and Sweden, with high levels, both report high levels of child well-being? The researchers argued that both countries have many social policies and programs designed to help children and their families to keep them out of poverty, such as universal health insurance, subsidized childcare, a dependent child grant from the government, expanded paid maternity leaves, and many other programs that help families stay strong. From this, they concluded that *poor child outcomes result from weak social policies that don't provide the support that our naturally evolving family structure requires*. In other words, poor child outcomes don't simply happen because of change *per se*, and they aren't inevitable.



## Bringing It Full Circle

In the beginning of this chapter, we introduced you to several groups of people and for each group posed the question, “Are they a family?” With the new information presented in this chapter, you now know how important the answer to this question can be. Our definitions of family and our views about family relationships reflect both micro-level and macro-level factors.

Micro-level factors include issues of personal choice and interpersonal dynamics. Macro-level factors include broader social structures, such as social institutions and the statuses of sex, race and ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. Rather than relying on common sense, personal opinion, or “It has always been that way . . .,” family scientists are interested in systematically uncovering the patterns of our relationships and answering intriguing questions using social science research methods.

Armed with your new information about families, reflect on the opening vignette.

- Do you think that all of the individuals, couples, and groups introduced are a family? Why or why not?
- Which are more accepted as families in our society, and why? Which are less accepted?
- Choose one of the families in the opening vignette, and explain how both micro-level and macro-level factors shape how society views this family type and influences their family patterns and interactions.
- What questions do you have about the families in the opening vignette, and how could social science research help answer these questions?

## CHAPTER REVIEW

### LO1.1 Identify the different definitions of “family” and their implications

#### 1.1 How does this text define *family*, and how does it differ from a legal perspective?

This text defines a family more broadly than the federal government. *Family* is a relationship by blood, marriage, or affection, that may cooperate economically, may care for any children, and may consider their core identity to be intimately connected to the group. Thus, this definition may include unmarried homosexual or heterosexual partners.

#### 1.2 Why is the definition of family so important?

How our society defines a family has important consequences for many different rights, privileges, and responsibilities. Only married persons are eligible for federal benefits, such as Social Security benefits or the ability to file taxes jointly. These decisions involve billions of dollars in employer and government benefits and affect millions of adults and children each year.

### LO1.2 Describe the functions of families

#### 1.3 What are the functions that families provide?

Families provide many functions, including marriage; regulation of sexual behavior; reproducing and socializing children; property and inheritance; economic cooperation; social placement, status, and roles; and care, warmth, protection, and intimacy.

### LO1.3 Recognize the link between micro-level and macro-level perspectives on families

#### 1.4 What is the difference between a *micro-level* and a *macro-level* perspective for the study of families?

People often think of our relationships solely in personal terms, which is a micro-level perspective, but relationships are also shaped by the social structure. Our attitudes and behaviors, likes and dislikes, aren't completely random, but are formed by many social forces. A macro-level perspective examines the ways in which marriage, families, and intimate relationships are interconnected with the rest of society and its institutions.

#### 1.5 What is *social structure*, and why is it important?

*Social structure* refers to the patterns of social organization that guide our interactions with others. Part of this

social organization includes our social institutions and social statuses. Social structures shape our daily experiences, privileges, and constraints.

### LO1.4 Assess the ways that families are always changing

#### 1.6 What types of marriage and kinship patterns exist around the world?

Marriage patterns include *monogamy* (including serial monogamy) and two types of *polygamy* (polygyny and polyandry). Patterns of authority include *patriarchy*, *egalitarian*, and (theoretically, at least) *matriarchy*. Patterns of descent include *bilateral*, *patrilineal*, and *matrilineal*, and residential patterns include *neolocal*, *patrilocal*, and *matrilocal*.

#### 1.7 How would we characterize the changes in China's families and family policy in recent generations?

Interrelated with the changes in China's economy, China's families have moved from a large amount of parental involvement and supervision to greater individual freedom of choice. However, the Chinese people must adhere to strict governmental rules regulating marriage and fertility. Couples must request permission both to marry and to have a child. Families are generally only allowed one child.

#### 1.8 How have families changed throughout history, and what macro-level factors that have contributed to that change?

Families evolved from being largely economic units to being based on mutual affection, sexual attraction, compatibility, and personal happiness. Several macro-level factors contributed to these changes, including urbanization, industrialization, immigration, social events such as wars and the Great Depression, and the rise of new technologies.

### LO1.5 Summarize the importance of social science theory and research

#### 1.9 How does social science research help us understand families?

An empirical approach can describe some phenomenon, examine the factors that predict or are associated with some phenomenon, explain cause-and-effect relationships, or provide insight into why certain events do or do not occur.

### 1.10 What methods do family scholars use to study families?

Many different methods are used to study families. Depending on the research question, studies can be based on surveys, in-depth interviews, experiments, observation, focus groups, or the analysis of secondary data.

### 1.11 How can theory help us understand families and family research?

Research is guided by *theory*, which is a general framework, explanation, or tool used to understand and describe the real world. Theories are important both before and after data have been collected because they

help us decide what topics to research, what questions to try to answer, how best to answer them, and how to interpret the research results. Before collecting data, theories can help us frame the question. When data have been collected and patterns emerge, theories help us make sense of what was found.

### 1.12 Are Americans rejecting marriage and families?

Families are changing, but there is little evidence that Americans are rejecting marriage and families. If we look at both attitudes and behaviors, we can see that most Americans do marry and do have children. However, the age at marriage has risen, and more women are remaining childfree.

## KEY TERMS

bilateral  
companionate family  
conflict theory  
developmental theory  
egalitarian  
empirical approach  
experiment  
extended family  
family  
family of orientation  
family of procreation  
feminist theory  
fictive kin  
focus group  
human agency  
in-depth interview

marriage  
master status  
matriarchy  
matrilineal  
matrilocal  
macro-level  
micro-level  
monogamy  
neolocal  
nuclear family  
observational study  
patriarchy  
patrilineal  
patrilocal  
polyandry  
polygamy

polygyny  
qualitative research  
quantitative research  
random sample  
secondary analysis  
social exchange theory  
social institution  
social structure  
socialization  
status  
structural functionalism theory  
survey  
symbolic interaction theory  
systems theory  
theory