Understanding Marriage and Families across Time and Place
Defining the Family
Institutional and Disciplinary Concerns

Case Example

What Is a Family? Is There a Universal Standard?
What Do Contemporary Families Look Like?

Ross and Janet have been married more than forty-seven years. They have two children, a daughter-in-law and a son-in-law, and four grandsons. Few would dispute the notion that all these members are part of a common kinship group because all are related by birth or marriage. The three couples involved each got engaged, made a public announcement of their wedding plans, got married in a religious ceremony, and moved to separate residences, and each female accepted her husband’s last name. Few would question that each of these groups of couples with their children constitutes a family, although a question remains as to whether they are a single family unit or multiple family units.

More difficult to classify are the families of Vernon and Jeanne and their children. Married for more than twenty years, Vernon and Jeanne had four children whom have had vastly different family experiences.

Their oldest son, John, moved into a new addition to his parents’ house when he was married and continues to live there with his wife and three children. Are John, his wife, and his children a separate family unit, or are they part of Vernon and Jeanne’s family unit?

The second child, Sonia, pursued a career in marketing and never married. She realized in her middle twenties that she was more attracted to women than she was to men and developed a long-term committed relationship with another woman, Elaine. Both religious persons, Sonia and Elaine had a “commitment ceremony” presided over by an Episcopal minister eight years ago and have been living together...
ever since. They have a child, James, whom Sonia conceived through artificial insemination. Are Sonia, Elaine, and James a family?

Sonia’s younger brother Jim married Terry when he was 18 after fathering her child, Cody. They divorced a year later and both have now remarried. Where is the family here? Are they one big family or separate families? Which family does Cody belong to? Can Cody belong to two different families?

Finally, the youngest daughter Yvette also has a child, Nathan, who was born when she was still a teenager. Nathan’s father did not initially take responsibility for Nathan and never married Yvette. Today, Yvette and Nathan live in an apartment nearby with Yvette’s new boyfriend, but Nathan’s father has begun to take an interest in Nathan and often visits with him. Are Yvette and Nathan a family? Is Yvette’s new boyfriend who lives with her a part of her family? What about Nathan’s dad? Is he a part of Yvette’s family? Is he a part of Nathan’s family?

Questions to Consider

What do you perceive a marriage and/or a family to be? If couples live together, is it a marriage? Does fathering or conceiving a child automatically make you part of that child’s family? What if you never marry or are divorced and live alone with a child? Can individuals form a family based on a same-sex relationship?

How do you know where one family begins and another ends? Can people be part of different families at the same time? What is the difference between a family and a kinship group?

What difference does our definition of a family make in terms of society and societal functioning? What difference does it make in individuals’ lives?

The family. What is the family? Or should the question be: “What are families?” Does the family consist of one female legally married to one male? Is the family restricted to groups that have children born within wedlock; a husband, employed full time, serving as the primary provider and ultimate authority; and a wife who is a full-time mother and homemaker? Or does the family include a single parent, divorced or never married, raising his or her children? Does the family include a wife who is employed full time and a husband who chooses to be the primary child rearer? Is a childless couple a family? Is the family any cohesive, loving, sexually exclusive unit, bound until death? Or is the family sometimes less than cohesive, even conflict ridden and abusive? Do members of the family always live together?

Traditionally, and legally, the family refers to two or more persons related by birth, marriage, or adoption who reside together in a household. This definition is how the U.S. Census defines families. It is a definition that emphasizes the structural dimension of families because it focuses on the requirements for membership and the spatial arrangements of members. But families can also be, and often are, defined in terms of their functional significance as a societal institution (i.e., what they do for society) or in terms of their unique relational characteristics (i.e., how their members interact with each other). For example, we might define the family as an institution responsible for procreation and the socialization of children. This definition emphasizes the functional dimension. Or, we might define a family as any social group in which the members love each other, are highly interdependent, and
have a commitment to each other and a strong sense of loyalty. This definition emphasizes the relational dimension.

Regardless of which dimensions we use, it is important to keep in mind that these definitions are not true in any metaphysical sense. Societies have created terms such as family to refer to some aspect of social reality or an ideal reality. These terms, like all terms, are social constructions—classifications of reality agreed on by members of a social group. Because all social constructions come about through a process of agreement among group members, they are to some degree arbitrary. Different groups may, and often do, define the family in different ways. What shapes these definitions is the way the society or societal subgroup is structured, that is, how it has chosen to accomplish necessary tasks for survival and how power is distributed in the group. Thus, to some degree the definitions reflect adaptations to environmental circumstances and previous societal conditions, but they are also the product of cultural innovations and a process by which those in positions of power and privilege promote definitions that serve their own interests and values.

As Judith Stacey notes, the family is a symbol linked to an ideology, where ideology refers to a value system linked to a position in the power structure of society. Those in positions of power promote certain values and behaviors that give them legitimacy and create a sense of normalcy and naturalness to the social order on which their power is based. The way in which social institutions such as the family are defined reflects the dominant value system. It is part of the ideology. These definitions maintain the current social order by setting the criteria for what is considered deviant. From a sociological perspective, deviance is not a moral issue as much as it is a social construction premised on what behaviors are defined as normative (or normal). Behaviors (or social arrangements) considered deviant are discouraged through negative sanctions. In this way, the current order is maintained. In the case of the family, some traditional definitional elements—such as the ideology that families should be small and based on a marital unit (two parents), that marriage should be between a man and a woman, that men should be providers and women nurturers, that the older generation should have more decision-making authority and command more respect, and that children should be disciplined rather than reasoned with—can be linked to the relative power of different interest groups in society. These groups can be based on gender (men versus women), generation (older versus younger), sexual preference (heterosexual versus same sex), and social class (owner versus worker), as well as others.

Viewing selected patterns of behavior or institutions as not necessarily fixed entities has led a number of scholars to question whether the word family is even a meaningful concept, since it implies images of heterosexual couples, love, permanence, children, sexual exclusivity, homemakers, legal unions, and intergenerational continuity. Such scholars have questioned whether these images are anything more than a perceived idealism that is inconsistent with the realities of today’s relationships: remarriages, dual careers, childless couples, one-parent households, same-sex unions, gender inequalities, abusive partners, and intergenerational disruptions. It is suggested that families be considered less in terms of structure and stability and more in terms of ongoing process and change, less in terms of traditional images and standards by which everything else is judged and more in terms of close

1Judith Stacey, In the Name of the Family: Rethinking Family Values in the Post-Modern Age (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).
relationships and sexually bonded primary relationships. The former terms suggest a traditional view held by a select segment of the population, whereas the latter suggest a broader, more comprehensive, and more accurate portrayal of the reality of human, close, primary, and sexually bonded relationships. In recognition of the variation in societal arrangements and definitions, the leading professional organization for those studying and working with families—the National Council on Family Relations—actually changed the name of its journal in the year 2000 from The Journal of Marriage and the Family to The Journal of Marriage and Family.

One difficulty with expanding our notion of family, however, is finding terms or concepts that differentiate family from nonfamily relationships and experiences. Family realm has been suggested as a term that differentiates familial types of human relationships from nonfamilial types such as political, economic, medical, educational, military, and artistic relationships. More recently, the concept of family transcendence has been introduced as a unifying theme for family realm characteristics. The transcendent reaches beyond the senses and invites holistic inquiry into connections and dimensions of location and meaning that heretofore have not been seen as appropriate for scientific inquiry. Jan Trost proposes a system of dyadic units to define and conceptualize family. Individuals might define what their own families consist of and may include two men who cohabit, an ex-spouse, parents-in-law, stepparents, siblings, friends, and even pets. Any dyad (two persons) or set of dyads could be considered a family. Although we recognize the philosophical foundations and critical value of the family transcendence approach, we are not ready to discard scientific inquiry. We find more value in the concept of family realm insofar as we believe it is possible to identify aspects of family groups or systems that distinguish them from other types of groups or systems without necessarily endorsing one form of family group (i.e., family institution) over another.

Thus, this book views the family as both a social institution and as a scientifically meaningful category of social groups. Various nation states in the world

---


define “the family” differently. These diverse definitions can be seen by the different ways they assign rights and responsibilities and implement social policies based on legal and/or biological ties. These institutional definitions are the product of both unique aspects of adaptation and politics in each nation state as well as more global processes and conditions. We will examine these family and family-like patterns to try to understand how and why these institutional definitions have come about. But we will also approach the family as an entity with certain systemic properties that distinguish it from other types of groups, using what might be called an analytical definition of the family. Such a definition highlights key elements of group structure and relationships that make life in families different from life in other types of groups. For example, we could argue that families are unique because they have both emotional and instrumental functions. That is, they are groups where members have to be concerned about and care for the feelings of other group members at the same time that they have to direct the actions of members and control their behaviors in order to achieve group goals and accomplish group tasks. Therefore, family groups require unique solutions for task accomplishment and the maintenance of social order within the group. We see such a definition as less biased toward members of a particular culture and more useful in coming to an understanding of how individuals act differently in families and how family groups function differently from other types of groups in society. In shaping this definition, we will not be so specific that we fail to recognize the diversity of family arrangements, but we also will try not to be so inclusive that any social group can be classified as a family. To do the latter would give us no guidelines for our subject of interest and, we believe, would ignore the reality of social groups.

We begin this chapter and text by distinguishing between definitions of the family as an institution and as a social group or system. As sociologists, we are concerned with the ways in which institutional definitions of the family are constructed, but we are also interested in increasing our understanding of the dynamics of social groups or systems with characteristics that we might define as family-like. We then review terminology that might help us distinguish between different types of family institutions and groups. Knowing where one family ends and another begins can be important for understanding the dynamics of the interactions that take place within them. As we will discover, these boundaries are not universally defined and are not always clear. Distinguishing between kinship groups and families is also important.

Although the title of this text remains The Family, we recognize that the family as a social group includes marriages as well as groups that do not fit traditional notions of what marriages and families are or should be. Many relationships (same sex, cohabiters, fictive kin, unmarried parents, and the like) fulfill responsibilities basic to social system functioning or that exhibit structural and relational characteristics that distinguish them from other types of groups and unite them in terms of their internal system dynamics. Current research findings have been incorporated in an effort to understand the similarities as well as the differences among the norms, values, and behaviors that characterize marriage and family-type relationships.

**Family as a Social Institution**

Frequent reference has been made by both scholars and others to the family as the most basic of all social institutions, linked closely to the supporting institution of marriage. What does this mean?
Lisa McIntyre defines a social institution as “a set of ideas about the way a specific important social need ought to be addressed.”\(^6\) Thus, the concept of an “institution” refers to specific areas of human social life that have become broadly organized into discernible patterns and supported by agreed upon expectations or standards for goals and behavior. What constitutes a “social need” can vary from time to time and from place to place. Although it can be argued that certain fundamental needs must be met in all societies (e.g., the recruitment of new members, the nurturance and socialization of children, and the maintenance of social solidarity and some level of social order), we maintain a position of neutrality on this point so as not to imply needs based on our own cultural perspective and interests (e.g., a need to suppress political resistance, the need to maintain a hierarchical system of gender relations, etc.). All that we can know with certainty is that societies organize their activities and relationships in response to environmental demands and politically influenced collective perceptions, and these organized responses become reinforced through socialization experiences, value and belief systems, and social norms enforced by sanctions. Furthermore, we are open to the possibility that the development of institutions is not constrained by the boundaries of nation states. Although both local and national politics certainly play a major role in how the family is defined as an institution, in the end such definitions must be responsive to the demands of an increasingly interdependent global environment.

More importantly, we also maintain a position of neutrality with respect to the inherent necessity of any institution in society. Although it may be possible to identify a small set of institutions that have existed in some form across all known societies and time periods, this in itself does not argue that such institutions are necessary for societal survival or even optimal for human life. In addition, the variations in structures, functions and relational patterns found across societal contexts within what is nominally called the same institution (e.g., “the family”) is sufficient to argue that no single institutionalized pattern of relationships is essential.

A related term, institutionalize, is a verb that means to establish patterned and predictable behavior. The emergence of patterned and predictable behaviors is a complex process shaped by both individuals living their day-to-day lives under common environmental demands and constraints and structures of power in society that allow some groups to alter the behaviors of other groups to better serve their self-interests. As patterns of life begin to emerge, they are either adopted by an increasing number of people and recognized as legitimate or they find less support and are abandoned. Which occurs depends on the adaptive value of the patterns as well as their implications for those in positions of power. For example, although nonmarital childbearing appeared to be a new emerging pattern of life in American society in the late twentieth century, it never achieved institutional status and has declined steadily since the 1990s. A similar fate awaited the emergence of so-called “serial monogamy” where high divorce rates coupled with high remarriage rates suggested a new pattern where lifelong marriage was rejected in favor of a pattern of more conditional commitments. Like nonmarital childbearing, this pattern of divorce and remarriage has also experienced a decline because it failed to meet the needs of individuals and the broader society and/or it was not compelling enough to overcome the influence of powerful interest groups (e.g., men, religious groups) that benefitted from a model of lifelong marital commitments. Cohabitation, on the

other hand, may be in the process of becoming institutionalized as more and more young people today choose to cohabit before marriage and the nature of these cohabitations becomes more patterned, predictable, and accepted. Similarly, it could be argued that child socialization through daycare has emerged as an institutionalized pattern in response to a modern industrial society where women have taken on more vital and powerful economic roles.

The institutionalization process does not occur without repercussions for existing societal institutions. The emergence of new patterns of organization in family life creates limits and demands on, as well as opportunities for, the ways other institutions are organized. Similarly, changes in the organization of other institutions have implications for the organization of families. This interdependency of institutions in society is perhaps best illustrated by the changes that resulted from the needs of a modern capitalist economy to incorporate more women into the labor force and the corresponding power that women gained as a result of their new economic roles. As women were drawn into the labor force, they were also drawn out of their families, creating an organizational crisis for an existing family organization that had been based on a gendered division of labor with women responsible for home and child care. How did families respond? They began by seeking out relatives and others to help them care for their youngest children. As the need grew, however, new institutions—daycare centers—came into existence and flourished. This new institutional option for child care in turn made possible increasing involvement of women in economic careers, which has further empowered them to bring about a reorganization of role responsibilities in their families vis-à-vis their husbands. Although this is a significant oversimplification of the institutionalization process that occurred in the late twentieth century, it hopefully conveys the complexity and interdependencies involved in institutionalization. As new institutions arise to meet new needs or as an outcome of societal conflict between interest groups, existing institutions often are redefined and could even become obsolete. Thus, the redefinition of an institution such as the family or its complete elimination does not necessarily mean the downfall of society. It may simply reflect the reorganization of the ways we address societal needs.

Few institutions have received more recognition and criticism than the family, and marriage as its central component. Both have been claimed to be the solution to problems, on the one hand, and the basic cause of problems, on the other hand. For example, in the late 1990s, a number of professional family scholars claimed that marriage is an institution in decay and basically responsible for the increases in violent crime, child neglect and abuse, the psychological pathology of children and youth, alcohol and drug abuse, poverty, and even declining SAT scores. And if families and marriages are the cause of the problems, their solution resides in the same institution. Marriages are to be made stronger by reclaiming the ideal of marital permanence, declaring out-of-wedlock childbearing wrong, having children grow up with two parents, and increasing the time parents spend raising their children. In brief, they argued, it is important to stress traditional family values (although we should note that the term traditional often is used in a selective manner and with little regard for historical facts; see Chapter 2).

---

7 David Popenoe, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and David Blankenhorn, Promises to Keep: Decline and Renewal of Marriage in America (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1996).

8 Ibid., 308.
As we will discuss later, such assertions are based on correlations among aggregate indicators incapable of demonstrating or testing the relationship between individual family breakdowns and specific child outcomes (e.g., criminal behavior). Furthermore, the causal timing is difficult to establish. For example, is it family breakdown that causes poverty or poverty that leads to family breakdown? Houseknecht and Sastry\(^9\)

DEFINING THE FAMILY

caution us about accepting at face value such across-the-board deleterious outcomes for child well-being as asserted by Popenoe. In a comparative study of the relationship between family decline and child well-being in four countries (Sweden, United States, the former West Germany, and Italy), the results do not indicate unequivocal support for the thesis that countries ranked higher on family decline will rank lower on child well-being. Although, in general, children are better off when they live in a society in which traditional family patterns are strong, there are exceptions. Sweden, for example, which had the highest family decline score, did not demonstrate a high level of negative outcomes for children compared with other countries with lower levels of family decline.

In thinking, then, about the needs families (or any societal institution) are called on to fulfill, it is important to keep in mind the many ways that a society might choose to fulfill the same needs. This substitutability of structures is referred to as functional equivalence.10 It is, thus, impossible to argue that a society must have a family subsystem in order to survive, and it is even less defensible to argue that only one form of a family system is viable or optimally adaptive for societal survival. Families may be unique in their organization around serving both the instrumental needs of society and the long-term emotional needs of their members (i.e., their combination of emotional and instrumental functionality), but to designate any specific functions as necessary components of the family (e.g., reproduction, child nurturance and socialization, economic production, etc.) based on current or past societal arrangements would be to

---

reify (make more real or justified than they are) those cultural systems. We believe it may be possible for a society to be functional without an organized family system, but we also believe the family as a type of system has certain generic characteristics that make it highly suitable for fulfilling certain societal needs that often arise.

Popenoe has suggested that textbooks such as this be rewritten to portray marriage with children as a desirable social goal and not simply as one of many viable lifestyle alternatives. We agree that on a personal level such goals and values may be of worth, but they may not be of equal worth to all across all social contexts. We also believe that taking such a monolithic view ignores the importance of context in understanding social institutions and contributes to the dominance of one cultural group’s values over others. The intent of this book is not to advocate any particular marital or family value or lifestyle. Rather, the intent is to examine how attitudes and values about what is acceptable and ideal come about, as well as to understand the diversity of family groups and systems.

Families as Systems and Groups

The term family system is used in sociology much as physicists and biologists speak of solar or biological systems. In each instance, the word system means a configuration of interdependent parts. All systems, whether living or nonliving, have characteristic organizations and patterns of interdependence and are comprised of and embedded within a set of subsystems. The nature of their organization and interdependencies is what distinguishes one type of system from another.

In nonliving systems (e.g., vending machines, automobile engines, etc.), organizational characteristics and patterns of interdependence are determined by outside forces and are unchangeable. In the case of living systems such as the family, however, change can and does come about from external forces (e.g., societal pressures and needs) as well as internal ones (e.g., individual pressures and needs). To complicate matters even further, these external and internal forces do not operate independently in shaping the family system. External forces are reacted to and processed by the individuals in a family system in a way that reflects their own internal pressures and needs. Similarly, as family systems shape themselves to address the pressures and needs derived from their members, they interact with their environments in ways that reflect societal pressures and needs, resulting in different system configurations under various environmental conditions and, over time, a potential change in other societal subsystems. One need only look at the uneven effects of industrialization and capitalism on families at different locations in the larger social system and the rise of public educational and daycare systems to see how families change in response to external pressures as well as how they reciprocally influence the social system within which they are embedded.

To treat the family as a social system is to note its form of social organization and the nature of its interdependencies, that is, to construct an analytical definition. The basic units, therefore, of a marital or family system are not persons but the interrelated statuses (positions) and the established patterns of expectations (roles) that accompany those statuses. Although people are part of the system, it is the statuses, roles, norms, ways of ranking, means of social controls, and values (all abstractions) of those people that are significant in examining social systems.

The interrelated statuses in the family system potentially include, among others, parent–child, husband–wife, uncle–aunt, grandparent–grandchild, father–mother,
and brother–sister relationships. Each of these status combinations implies a set of mutual role expectations, obligations, and rights that are worked out by those in the relationships in a way that addresses broader family system concerns as well as their own individual wants and needs. The regularities of these expectations, obligations, and rights across families in similar social locations and with similar membership characteristics are of primary interest to the sociologist. To illustrate this interest, the comparison of same-sex couples to heterosexual couples is instructive.

In many ways, the marital relationship of a same-sex couple will mirror the marital relationship of a heterosexual couple who occupy the same position in the larger social system (e.g., social class, ethnicity, geography, etc.). Add a child to the mix and both sets of couples will experience similar changes to their relationship. As we will discuss later, these similarities derive from such common conditions as the intergenerational nature of marriage, the unique mixture of primary and secondary group functions fulfilled in the context of marriage, the high levels of interdependence across domains found in marriage, and the expectations for duration and high levels of commitment that develop in marriages. Like heterosexual couples, same-sex couples will need to alter their interactions to adapt to common pressures in their environment as well as their common concern for fulfilling their individual psychological needs within the context of their relationship and the demands of maintaining a relationship under conditions of long-term commitment.

This is not to say that both marriage systems will be identical or that any particular spousal status combination, regardless of sexual orientation, will organize their marriage exactly the same way. The combination of sexes in a marriage sets the conditions for marital organization by virtue of the fact that society is structured along the lines of sex and members of society are expected to act in different ways accordingly. It is also the case that sexual orientation has been an organizing principle in most societies (both as a legitimate status as well as a deviant status). This then acts as a crosscurrent in designating an individual couple’s location in the larger social system. As a result, a same-sex marital couple of the same ethnicity, social class, and geographical location should also be expected to look different from its heterosexual counterpart and this difference will occur regardless of the individuals involved (i.e., regardless of their morality or psychological makeup). Similarly, a same-sex male couple should be expected to look different from a same-sex female couple by virtue of different gender socialization experiences and different levels of discriminatory treatment in the larger society. There will also be individual differences across couples who are similar in all aspects of their social location whether homosexual or heterosexual in orientation. These individual differences often stem from the personality traits of those involved in the marriage and are treated more fully by psychologists. For sociologists, however, these individual differences are treated as residual and are assumed to vary randomly across all types of couples.

We believe the uniqueness of the family as a system (i.e., the characteristics that distinguish it from other types of systems) lies in three sets of factors—structural, functional, and relational. These factors will serve as our analytical definition of the family and will set the parameters for what we cover in this text and what we include as family theory and research.

First, at the structural level, families are to some degree intergenerational groups. In the case of a parent and his or her child, the intergenerational nature of the family structure is obvious. By virtue of this intergenerational connection, there
is an inherent role organization and structure of rights and obligations stemming from the members’ capabilities and dependencies. This structure sets the stage for intergenerational relationships that will impact the child’s later marriage, with or without children. Although parents are not part of their child’s marriage in modern industrial societies, they nevertheless alter the conditions of social organization within the marriage through the transmission of culture, the conditions of support outside the system, and the intrusiveness of outsiders in the marital system. These are structural conditions unlike those found in other social systems (e.g., educational systems, occupational systems, etc.).
DEFINING THE FAMILY

Second, at the functional level, it has already been noted that families are unique in their functionality at both the emotional and instrumental levels. As discussed later, families are both primary and secondary groups. As a result, the nature of the interactions that occur within families is modified as members must accomplish tasks efficiently as well as be attentive to the emotional needs of their members. This is one of the problems with applying rational economic models to help families better accomplish their goals. What works within an economic system may not work within a family system because the latter is unique in its need to meet the primary emotional needs of its members. The levels of emotional and instrumental functionality will vary from society to society and from time to time as other social systems may augment one or the other functions or put additional pressure on the family system to meet individual emotional or instrumental needs to a different degree, but the duality of the functionality in families is unmatched by other social systems.

Finally, families have certain relational qualities that distinguish them from other types of groups. We have no basis to argue that families are inherently places of loyalty, love, and affection. In fact, Straus\(^\text{11}\) has argued that families can be “crucibles of violence.” Instead, Straus points to the relational qualities of family life that provide the basis for distinguishing families from other types of groups. Families are characterized by extremely high levels of interdependence across a variety of domains (emotional, psychological, physical, behavioral, economic, social, etc.). This interdependence may not be voluntary and may even be resisted by family members, but it nevertheless exists and influences family members’ reactions to each other. In addition to this interdependence, families are characterized by expectations for duration. Although many couples today eschew the traditional marital vow of “until death do us part” and some replace it with the vow of “for as long as our love shall last,” in all cases couples enter into marriage and begin families with the expectation that their union is not temporary and will outlive other relationships or involvement in other systems such as school, work, community, and church. As noted later in the discussion of social exchange theory, this relational quality is important insofar as it conditions the interactions that occur in families both in terms of the exchange of valued resources and the interdependence of identities.

Primary versus Secondary Groups

Sociologists view groups as the core of their attention. They speak of in- and out-groups, primary and secondary groups, formal and informal groups, large and small groups, minority and majority groups, open and closed groups, organized and unorganized groups, independent and dependent groups, voluntary and involuntary groups, and others. Some of these constructs are more useful to understanding family systems than others. One distinction that appears particularly important for understanding families is primary versus secondary group relationships.

A primary group consists of a small number of people who interact in direct, personal, and intimate ways. Primary-group relationships are facilitated by (1) face-to-face contact, (2) smallness of size, and (3) frequent and intense contact. Unlike most primary groups, the family is special because it is so essential, both to individuals and

to society, and its formation usually is legitimized by the community through religious
and legal rituals. Although most other primary groups can disband voluntarily,
the dissolution of the family group generally is accomplished through institutionalized
means.

Much of the importance of marital, family, and kinship groups lies in their
function as primary groups. What functions does a primary group serve?

1. For most individuals, the primary group serves as the basic socializing agent for
the acquisition and internalization of beliefs and attitudes.

2. Primary groups constitute the chief focus for the realization of personal satisfaction
and fulfillment. In modern society, the family, perhaps more than any other source,
influences its members’ general sense of well-being, companionship, ego worth,
security, and affection. This primacy of the family as a primary group may lie in the
lack of alternative stable primary groups in a highly mobile, industrial, and capital-
istic society. Unfortunately, involvement in primary groups, although necessary,
may not always lead to satisfactory outcomes for individuals. Most people, when
away from home for the first time, experience homesickness or a nostalgia for the
primary group from which their immediate ties have been severed. Others experi-
ience relief at being freed from the oppression that primary ties can also create.

3. Primary groups, such as families, are also potentially important agents of indirect
social control (social control brought about by the learning of rules
and principles for behavior and maintained by internal psychological processes
rather than outside pressures or threats of punishment). Primary groups have
an extraordinary power to teach prosocial values, convey lessons of social
responsibility, and bring about voluntary conformity because most people
depend on other primary group members for meeting their psychological needs
and for realizing meaningful social experiences.

The opposite of the primary group is the secondary group. Many if not most
involvements in school, work, and the communities are characterized not by the in-
timate, informal, and personal nature of primary groups but rather by impersonal,
segmental, and utilitarian contacts. Secondary groups basically are goal oriented
rather than person oriented. For instance, the personal life of a bus driver, or a
classmate, or an insurance salesperson is not of major significance in fulfilling the
goals established for interactions with these people.

Of course, families also have a secondary component. In the past, families were
relied on to produce what was necessary for subsistence and survival or to function
as a political or military unit. The transference of wealth and external social control
are two other secondary functions that families have been known to fulfill. Today,
families are, for the most part, no longer economic production units, but they still
function within the economic system as consumption units (e.g., they purchase
houses, furniture, automobiles, etc.) that require rational organization of economic
activity. They are also given other secondary group functions such as the direct
external social control of members (both children and spouses) and the transference
of wealth through inheritance.

In modern societies, such as those found in the United States and elsewhere
(e.g., Canada, Western Europe, Scandinavia, Australia and New Zealand), most

---

Therapeutic Concerns in Transnational Families

The process of economic globalization was made possible by advances in information and transportation technologies, a breakdown in the political power of nation-states, and the drive of advanced capitalism to seek out cheaper sources of materials and labor for production. With this economic globalization has come a parallel globalization of social relations that has increased the exchange of peoples across borders and made possible a new kind of immigration experience.

Celia Falicov, a clinical psychiatrist in San Diego California, notes how these new immigrants from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia differ from those of the past who moved to the United States primarily from Europe. In particular, she notes how early immigrants had to make a clean break from their countries of origin and from family and kin left behind. Although this created many “broken hearts” and adjustment difficulties, these older immigrants faced a clearer set of parameters to confront in their lives. Modern day immigrants, on the other hand, can take advantage of technologies and more open borders to maintain relationships with others in their home countries. This presents a different set of challenges: “Links across borders bring about the ambiguities of living with two hearts instead of a broken heart.” (158). She highlights three sets of challenges that must be confronted.

The first is to recognize the unique ways that transnational families construct meaning in their lives. These families lack the advantage of family rituals and redundant interactions that give us a sense of coherency as a family and a sense of continuity of who we are over time. They are in a chronic state of “ambiguous loss” wherein family members are psychologically present but physically absent. This can result in many types of relational stress as family members are unclear about how they should act relative to each other. Although these families often create positive attachment behaviors in their children through communal parenting strategies in their home country, it is also important not to romanticize the strength of community ties and to recognize that home country conditions are not always favorable to optimal child development. Relational stress also occurs because separations are difficult and can cause high levels of guilt and resentment in family members. Also, reunions will not always be amicable. Members of a transnational family can become strangers to each other as a result of their prolonged separations. Expecting “family” type interactions upon reunion can lead to disappointment and conflict. Finally, transnational families must deal with “acculturative stress” as the receiving culture is more likely to have more egalitarian norms with respect to gender as well as have less age-based hierarchies than immigrants’ home cultures. As a result, spousal and family relations may become more strained as members lack a shared set of values related to their gender and age position in the family.

The second set of challenges involves their community context. Many immigrants place great importance on giving back to their home communities or making up for past deficiencies. There are also both positive and negative aspects to the ethnic communities within which many transnational families “rebuild” their home culture. These communities are positive insofar as they establish support networks and fend against discrimination. They can also be negative, however, insofar as they inhibit integration and sustain cultural values inconsistent with their new social context.

Finally, therapists and others need to recognize that transnational families often are faced with high levels of discrimination, suspicion, and subordination. As a result, issues of power and identity are likely to be significant, especially when they come into contact with agencies or persons of authority in the receiving culture.

relationships in the public domain have become more rational, formal, and impersonal. As a result, marriage and family groups have taken on new importance in the emotional lives of their members and have become increasingly vital to individual health and happiness. Of course, they have also maintained secondary functions related to day-to-day survival needs as the individuals involved need to coordinate their secondary survival activities to maintain these increasingly critical primary relationships. Thus, when families fail in modern societies, the results often are devastating. The absence or loss of familial networks as primary sources of social support has been linked to a wide range of negative outcomes: school truancy, accidents, suicides, commitment to mental hospitals, pregnancy disorders, coronary disease, and even lack of recovery from all types of illnesses. An argument could be made that, without families, survival in a modern society would be doubtful. This idea has been fairly well substantiated with infants and adults who have no family or close friends. One possible conclusion from all of this is that, rather than being in a state of decay or losing its significant functions and becoming obsolete, the U.S. family may be fulfilling a primary-group function that has seldom been more crucial and important in maintaining personal and social stability and well-being.

Characteristics of Marriage, Family, and Kinship Systems

Marriage, family, and kinship systems are institutionalized social arrangements in all known societies. However, the nature of the arrangement differs greatly across societies, over time, and even within a given society at a specific time. As noted earlier, how a society defines the family as an institution is determined partly by societal needs and partly by systems of power and conflict.

To understand how a society or cultural group defines a family requires a consideration of how it defines the boundaries of institutions. Who is or is not included as part of a marriage, family, or kinship group has implications for individual well-being, interaction patterns within the group, and other social institutions. In this section, we will discuss the variety of ways societies draw the boundaries of marriage and of family and kinship groups. We will also consider the system of social relationships shaped by those boundaries by presenting several “ideal types” of marriage, family, and kinship systems found around the world and throughout history. An explanation of and caution about ideal types are in order, however, before we begin.

Ideal Types

Ideal-type constructs always represent the ends, the extremes, or the poles of a continuum. Use of the word ideal is not meant to imply what is good, best, valuable, perfect, or desirable. Rather, ideal types are hypothetical constructs based on pure, definitive characteristics. Used hypothetically, ideal types provide contrasting qualities with which to characterize any social phenomenon. Patriarchal/matriarchal, arranged marriage/free choice marriage, endogamy/exogamy, primary/secondary, individual/familial, and rural/urban are examples of qualities of ideal types. In

ideal-type terms, the pure characteristics of either extreme may not exist anywhere in the world. Most marriages, families, and kinship systems fall somewhere on a continuum between the polar extremes.

The concept *ideal type* was systematically developed by the German sociologist Max Weber. He was careful to point out that, first, value connotations should be avoided. The prefix *ideal* denotes a constructed model, not evaluation or approval. This term makes no suggestion as to what ought to be or what norm of conduct warrants approval or disapproval. Second, an ideal type or ideal construct is not an average. An *average* denotes a central tendency; an *ideal* is an extreme. A society might be characterized as having an autonomous mate selection system because most individuals in the society are allowed to choose their own marriage partners, but this does not mean that it fits the ideal type perfectly. As you will learn later, in every autonomous system there is some degree of restriction on choice. We classify the society as autonomous because the patterns of marriage partner selection come closest to the autonomous end of the continuum of ideal types. Third, as mentioned, an ideal type does not reflect reality. It is an abstraction, a logical construct, a pure form; thus, by nature, it is not found in reality.

In short, an ideal type provides a standard to use to assess what any phenomenon would be if it always or never conformed to its own definition. Thus, ideal types enable social scientists to make valid and precise comparisons among societies, institutions, and families separated in time and place. They enable those who study the family to have a methodological tool that provides assistance in examining, for instance, the upper or lower classes, African American or white American families, or arranged or free choice mate selection. In the sections that follow, ideal types are used to examine variations in marriage, family, and kinship systems around the world and across historical time periods.

**Boundaries of Marriage**

Throughout the world, marriage is an institutional arrangement between persons, generally males and females, who recognize each other as husband and wife or intimate partners. Marriage is a strictly human social institution and assumes some permanence and conformity to societal norms.

About forty years ago, anthropologist William Stephens said marriage is (1) a socially legitimate sexual union, begun with (2) a public announcement, undertaken with (3) some idea of performance, and assumed with a more or less explicit (4) marriage contract, which spells out reciprocal obligations between spouses and between spouses and their children. For the most part, these same normative conditions exist today, although many marriage-like relationships are not defined by everyone as socially legitimate, are not begun with any type of announcement, are not entered into with the idea of permanence, and do not always have clearly defined contracts (written or nonwritten) as to what behaviors are expected. Thus, debate exists as to whether certain types of intimate relationships (such as among same-sex partners or unmarried cohabitants) are socially and legally recognized as marriages or families.

---


As noted earlier, any institutional definition is, in a certain sense, arbitrary. Most current definitions of marriage exclude persons in same-sex relationships, persons such as children, and persons who do not meet the social or cultural norms that specify what marriage is and who the legitimate partners are. In fact, many phenomenological, conflict, and feminist theorists (see Chapter 3) call into question the very use of labels such as *marriage*, *family*, and *kin*. The suggestion is that the very use of a label reifies a reality that ignores the historic origins and the range of meanings given to marriage and family by persons in their day-to-day lives.

Recognizing the danger of reifying the concept, let us turn our attention to historical and cross-cultural variations in marriage patterns, particularly as related to the number of persons involved.

**Typology of Marital Systems**

Marital status (single, married, separated, widowed, divorced) and number of spouses (none, one, more than one) are two major components of the boundaries of marriage. With a change in marital status and the number of spouses come variations in marital interaction patterns; living and sleeping arrangements; exclusivity of sexual interactions; the likelihood of and number of children; patterns of support, decision making, and authority; and male/female roles, to mention a few.

Sociologists and anthropologists have long used a typology of marital systems that focuses on the number of spouses allowed and preferred in a marriage and the gender of multiple spouses when allowed. The broadest distinction is between monogamous and polygamous systems. The suffix -*gamy* refers to marriage or a union for propagation and reproduction. Thus, *monogamy* (single), *bigamy* (two), *polygamy* (several or many), *allogamy* (closely related), *endogamy* (within), and *exogamy* (outside or external) describe the nature of marriage. **Monogamy** refers to marriage to a single spouse. **Polygamy** refers to marriage to several or many individuals; **bigamy** (marriage to two spouses) is a specific type of polygamy. Theoretically, there could be two or more wives (**polygyny**), two or more husbands (**polyandry**), or two or more husbands and wives (**group marriage**). Each of these is a polygamous marriage, as distinguished from a monogamous (one-spouse) marriage.

Before exploring each of these types further, it is important, once again, to note that these terms were constructed by social scientists to classify marriage systems under specific cultural conditions. Simply because these terms utilize the suffix -*gamy* does not mean that our conception of marriage systems has to be restricted to systems designed for propagation and reproduction. In fact, as we will see, the boundaries of marriage systems are constructed in societies for reasons having very little to do simply with propagation and reproduction of human children. Thus, nothing prevents us from using these same terms to refer to same-sex couples or those who do not desire to have children.

**Monogamy**

To most Americans, the most traditional as well as the most proper form of marriage is **monogamy**: one man to one woman (at a time). Throughout the world, this form of marriage is the only one universally recognized and is the predominant form even within societies where other forms exist. However, it should be noted that historically, on a societal basis, only a small percentage of societies in the world
DEFINING THE FAMILY

have been designated as strictly monogamous (monogamy as the required form).¹⁶ Monogamy is the predominant form in most societies because in societies where other forms are allowed or even preferred, most men are too poor to have more than one wife and the ratios of men to women make widespread practice of multiple spouses difficult.

Although the United States is designated as strictly monogamous, it is possible for Americans to have more than one husband or one wife. Because monogamy has never achieved perfect stability, certain married persons end their relationships and most of them remarry. Thus, the second spouse, although not existing simultaneously with the first, is sometimes referred to as fitting into a pattern of sequential or serial monogamy or remarriage. Thus, in U.S. society, it is both legally and socially approved to have more than one wife or more than one husband, as long as they occur sequentially and not simultaneously. Whether or not this practice is preferred or highly institutionalized, however, remains to be determined.

**Polygamy**

From the perspective of families in North America, polygamy is a nontraditional family form, but for most of the world this form of marriage is traditional and preferred. As mentioned previously, there are three possible types of polygamy: polygyny, polyandry, and group marriage. The frequency with which marriage to a plural number of spouses occurs normatively (as an expected or desired type of marriage) was investigated in the late 1950s in a classic study by George Murdock. In a world sample of 554 societies, polygyny was culturally favored in 415 (77 percent), whereas polyandry was culturally favored in only four (less than 1 percent): Toda, Marquesas, Nayar, and Tibet.¹⁷ Research over the years has never uncovered a society in which group marriage was clearly the dominant or most frequent form.

Before exploring patterns and explanations of polygamy across societies, several words of caution are needed concerning polygamy. First, it is necessary to maintain a clear distinction between ideology and actual occurrence. Occasionally, in the United States and elsewhere, groups advocate the right to have as many or as few spouses as desired, and when multiple-spouse marriages or communes are located and studied, the results are exploited by the mass media and given considerable attention. It seems, however, that the uniqueness or rarity of the situation attracts the attention rather than any commonality or acceptance.

Second, multiple spouses (except in group marriage) are only possible on a large scale when an unbalanced sex ratio (number of males per one hundred females) exists. Only if the sex ratio is high will polyandry be possible, and only when it is low will polygyny be possible. Such situations can be artificially created by increasing the permitted age at marriage for one sex (or making marriage more difficult by increasing its prerequisites) and decreasing it for the other (or easing requirements), and to some extent societies attempt to do this. This manipulation of the sex balance of available spouses, however, cannot be done without significantly increasing the number of single persons of one sex.

Third, polygamy is highly regulated and normatively controlled, as are all forms of marriage. Rarely does it involve a strictly personal or psychological motive.


¹⁷Ibid.
Polygamy has been illegal in the United States since 1878. Although groups that practice polygamy today identify themselves with Mormonism, the Mormon church rejected polygamy more than a century ago. In 2008, the U.S. government raided a polygamous compound of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS) in Eldorado, Texas, and removed more than 200 women involved in polygamous marriages and their more than 400 children.

Rather, polygamy is likely to be supported by the attitudes and values of both sexes and linked closely to the sex ratio, economic conditions, and belief systems.

Fourth, polygamy has many forms and variations of normative structure that determine who the spouse should be. Polygamous marriages often are nonconsanguineous, meaning that the multiple spouses involved in a single marriage are not related to each other by blood. Equally or even more likely, however, are consanguineous marriages where the multiple spouses are blood relatives. In most cases, the relationship is at the level of first or second cousins, but occasionally it is closer. For example, in some cases, all the multiple husbands are considered brothers (fraternal polyandry) or all the multiple wives are sisters (sororal polygyny). A levirate and sororate arrangement existed in the ancient Hebrew family. The levirate was a situation (technically, sequential monogamy) in which the wife

married the brother of her deceased husband, whereas the sororate was a situation in which the preferred mate for a husband was the sister of his deceased wife.

**Polygyny**

In the early 1980s, Welch and Glick selected fifteen African countries to illustrate the incidence (polygynists per hundred married men), intensity (number of wives per polygynist), and general index (number of wives per married man). The incidence of polygyny per hundred men was typically between twenty and thirty-five; that is, from about one in five to one in three married men had more than one wife. The intensity ranged from 2.0 to 2.5, which indicates that most polygynists had two wives rather than three or more. And for each country as a whole, the general index (number of wives per married man) ranged from 1.1 to 1.6, which indicates that most men, even in highly polygynous countries, had only one wife. Since then other researchers have demonstrated similar levels of polygyny. In one survey of African countries, 1993–1996 rates of polygynous marriage ranged from 18.6 percent (Zimbabwe) to 49.6 percent in Guinea. Furthermore, in spite of considerable social change and urbanization, most African countries experienced only modest reductions in polygyny, with Kenya leading the way with a 10 percent reduction in polygyny between 1977–1982 (29.5%) and 1993–1996 (19.5%). In Arab countries, polygyny is less widely practiced with rates ranging from 3.7 percent in Lebanon (1986) to somewhere between 11.1 and 19.1 percent in Algeria (1993). When translated into the number of women involved in polygynous marriages, estimates in both Arabia and Africa are in the range of 40–50 percent.

Kanazawa and Still argue that if resource inequality among men is great, women choose to marry polygynously as this strategy maximizes their outcomes from marriage. If there is a high level of inequality between men and only a limited number of men with wealth, then polygamous marriage increases the available marriage slots for women to marry into wealth. If resource inequality among men is small, women have less to gain in marrying polygynously and less to lose in marrying monogamously. Thus, shifts from polygyny to monogamy will only occur in response to a decline of inequality among men. A criticism of this theory is that it places all of the impetus for marriage choice on women and ignores male choices. Alternatively, Sanderson argues that polygyny results primarily from males’ desire for sexual variety, which has evolved because it enhances the likelihood of male reproductive success. Whether these or other theories are correct, it does appear that a negative correlation exists between polygyny and women’s status across societies. Polygyny is more common in countries such as

---

Africa and the Middle East where women’s status is low and less common in Western and more highly industrialized countries with a more egalitarian ethic.

Why have more than one wife? Many circumstances and motives contribute to polygyny. Polygyny appears to be a privilege of the wealthy. Often, having several wives is a mark of prestige, distinction, and high status. The chiefs, the wealthy, the best hunters, and the leaders get second and third wives. In Israel, throughout the Old Testament period, polygyny was practiced but often was restricted to men who were rich, occupied leading positions, or had some other claim to distinction. Even today in the Middle East, the common man has only one wife but wealthy men are more likely to have more than one. Such a motivation leads to a type of polygyny known as affluent polygyny. This type is widely practiced among middle- and upper-class males in Arab countries and contains many elements of control and exploitation of women. An alternative form of polygyny based on more practical concerns might be called intervention polygyny. Here, women choose to enter into polygynous marriages or to accept polygynous marriages because doing so resolves marital problems stemming primarily from the failure to produce male children.25

Other reasons given for polygyny include wife capture (where the men from one village literally take wives from another village), economic value of wifely services, and, in some instances, religious revelation. The frequently cited example of Mormon polygyny originated in a religious revelation to Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (the Mormon religion). Interestingly, some of the factors that led to the occurrence of polygyny in this religion were the same factors that led to its being outlawed. Namely, the Mormon faith was begun and maintained by devout conviction to carrying out God’s will; it was ended by a revelation from God to the president of the church forbidding the continuation of polygyny.

Christianity stamped Western society in a similar manner by outlawing polygyny. Polygyny was frequent among the pre-Christian tribes of Europe as well as in Old Testament Hebrew accounts. Gideon, the Israelite judge, had many wives who bore him seventy sons (Judges 8:30). King David had several wives (Samuel 25:39, 43; II Samuel 3:2 ff., 5:13), and King Solomon had a huge number of wives (I Kings 9:16; Song of Solomon 6:8).

The desire for children (especially male children) and the need to enhance their survival is greatly enhanced by polygyny. By sharing childbearing responsibilities, each family unit can produce more offspring at the same time that total fertility is reduced.26 This reduction in total fertility (the number of children a woman bears in a lifetime) comes about because of a number of factors ranging from reduced frequency of intercourse; competition dynamics between wives; extended breastfeeding creating conditions of lactational amenorrhea (absence or suppression of menstruation while breastfeeding); and longer birth intervals.

In addition to reduced fertility (and the potential health benefits to mothers and children that result from less frequent childbearing and longer birth intervals), there may be other advantages to polygyny. Although most people in western societies would expect jealousy, competition, and conflict as disruptive factors among multiple wives, it appears that polygyny can produce positive outcomes in terms of increased fertility and improved child survival.

wives, a study from Ibadan, Nigeria, where polygyny is very common, indicated that co-wives get along fairly well. When wives were asked how they would feel if their husbands took another wife, some 60 percent said they would be pleased to share the housework, husband care, and child rearing and to have someone to gossip and “play” with.27 Perhaps for this reason, in Nigeria, the number of plural wives was found to be related to the stability of marriage.28 However, unions with two wives were more stable than those with three or more wives. Despite an ideology of equity among all the wives, it is likely that, when there are more than two, differentiation increases among the wives on the basis of age, education, family wealth, and so on. Marriage to a third or fourth wife, thus, seems to intensify co-wife conflict and economic constraints.

On the negative side, polygyny, especially affluent polygyny, appears to have many negative psychological consequences for both mothers and children. Bedouin Arab women in polygynous marriages where found to have more psychological problems and marital distress than those in monogamous marriages, and their children also had more psychosocial problems and performed more poorly in school.29

What about polygyny in the United States today?30 The most frequently cited sources of polygyny are those of certain Mormon fundamentalists living in “underground” family units in Utah and neighboring states. These dissident Mormons have no affiliation with the mainline Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The number of these marriages is unknown.

**Polyandry**

Polyandry, the marriage of one woman to more than one man at the same time, appears quite rare. Stephens has made several generalizations about polyandry. First, polyandry and group marriage tend to go together; where one is found, the other will likely be found.31

Second, co-husbanding is fraternal. In the few cases in which the husbands are not brothers, they are clan brothers; that is, they belong to the same clan and are of the same generation. Among the Todas, a non-Hindu tribe in India, it is understood that when a woman marries a man, she becomes the wife of his brothers at the same time. Among the Yanomama Indians living in northern Brazil, a wife may have other recognized sexual unions with the consent of her husband. The most frequent union is with the husband’s younger brother, who, until he acquires his own wife, has a quasi-right to his older brother’s wife. The husband may also consent to share his wife with other males, kin or non-kin, who may be recognized as secondary husbands throughout their lives.32

---


Third, an economic inducement is often mentioned. A man tries to recruit co-husbands so they will work for him. In other instances, co-husbandry is practiced for economic security or as an answer to a land shortage. When several men marry one woman, the fragmentation of holdings, especially land, is avoided. Cassidy and Lee argued that economic factors are the key to understanding the very existence of polyandry. That is, the two most important antecedents to polyandry appear to be (1) extreme societal poverty with harsh environmental conditions and (2) limited roles for women in the productive economy.

Where polyandry does exist, there is frequent mention of female infanticide. It is a curious anomaly that male infanticide is rarely, if ever, mentioned in the literature. Female infanticide eliminates the wife surplus among polyandrous families; however, male infanticide does not seem to be used to eliminate the husband surplus in polygynous societies.

**Group Marriage**

Group marriage exists when several males and several females are married simultaneously to each other. Except on an experimental basis, this is an extremely rare occurrence and may never have existed as a viable form of marriage for any society in the world.

The Oneida Community of upstate New York has been frequently cited as an example of a group marriage experiment (see Family Diversity box). In the mid-1800s, the Oneida practiced economic and sexual sharing based on spiritual and religious principles. The group was an experimental religious community and not representative of U.S. society at the time. In addition, similar to most group marriages on record, the timespan of this experiment was limited. Rarely do such arrangements endure beyond one or two generations.

Group marriage has various difficulties that include getting all members to accept each other as spouses; avoiding jealousy over status, privileges, affection, and sex; and problems related to housing, income, children, privacy, and division of labor in general. What’s more, when group marriage does exist, the strong negative reactions of outside persons force anonymity and secrecy. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that group marriage will never become very popular.

**Boundaries of the Family**

It could be said that all marriages are families but not all families are marriages. And certain functions expected in the marital relationship (coitus or sexual intercourse) are taboo among certain family members (such as between brothers and sisters). As marriages differ structurally in the number of spouses, families differ structurally in size and composition.

**Typology of Family Systems**

One controversy in the family literature has focused on the extent to which families, particularly in the United States, are, and traditionally have been, small, isolated, independent units as opposed to large, interdependent networks. The extremes usually are represented by a nuclear/extended dichotomy, with modified nuclear and modified extended as intermediate positions. The major characteristics of these

---

Family Diversity

Group Marriage in the Oneida Community

The Oneida Community began in New York in 1848 with approximately twenty-five members. The leader, John Humphrey Noyes, gave up law to enter the ministry. He preached that human beings were capable of living sinless lives based on a spiritual equality of all persons: materially, socially, and sexually. Monogamy was a sign of selfish possessiveness.

Under the charismatic leadership of this man, the group grew and prospered. The emphasis was on we rather than on I. Economically, there was self-sufficiency and equal ownership of property. The Oneida made traps, marketed crops in cans and glass jars, did silk spinning, and manufactured silverware. To eliminate feelings of discrimination and sexual inequality, jobs were rotated.

The group differed from most other communal groups in its group marriage, or pantogamous (marriage for all), relationship. It was felt that romantic love made spiritual love impossible to attain and gave rise to jealousy, hate, and the like; therefore, everyone should literally love everyone else. Requests for sexual relationships were made to a central committee. A go-between, usually an older woman, would get the consent of the requested female (women rarely made requests), and, if agreed upon, the couple would go to the woman’s bedroom.

Any discord or problem among the Oneida was handled daily in a practice known as mutual criticism, in which the followers would subject themselves to criticism by the rest of the group. The criticized member would sit quietly while the others listed his or her good and bad points. The result was said to be a catharsis, a spiritual cleansing, with remarkably successful outcomes.

When Noyes left the group for Canada in 1879, for whatever reason (outside pressures, age, health, intra-commune strife), the group marriage practice came to an end. However, the economically successful venture continued.

On November 20, 1880, the group incorporated as Oneida Community, Ltd., to succeed Oneida Community. The present title, Oneida Ltd., was adopted in 1935.

Today, Oneida Ltd. is listed on the New York Stock Exchange (symbol OCQ). The company manufactures and markets a variety of tableware items, including silver-plated and stainless steel products, china dinnerware, and gift items such as glass stemware and barware. It is an international corporation with facilities throughout the world including Australia, Asia/Pacific, Canada, Mexico, Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. In 2001, the company had sales of more than $500 million, had nearly 4,600 employees, had a stock range of between $10 and $20, and was paying a small dividend.

This company, resulting from a mid-nineteenth-century utopian community, would make Noyes proud today. His children and grandchildren have prospered well. Although group marriage is out, profits are in.

Family types are outlined in Table 1.1 (page 28). The solution to this controversy lies in questions related to geographical isolation, economic independence, and social autonomy—in other words, in physical, economic, and social boundaries that separate one unit from another. Do families live separately from kin? Do other relatives outside the nuclear unit provide financial assistance or aid in times of need? Do kin provide significant emotional support, visiting patterns, and social activities?

A related controversy is whether the emergence of an isolated, independent, and autonomous nuclear family leads to high divorce rates; to the need for more public assistance programs for people who are aged, for single parents, or for families in poverty; and to an increase in personal instability (alcoholism, suicide, mental illness, and the like). This latter controversy cannot be answered simply. It is first necessary to understand the characteristics of each type of family system and how different family systems might have unique adaptive advantages under different
Table 1.1

Typology of Family Structures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NUCLEAR AND CONJUGAL</th>
<th>MODIFIED NUCLEAR AND MODIFIED EXTENDED</th>
<th>EXTENDED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small size</td>
<td>Intermediate size</td>
<td>Many kin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic isolation</td>
<td>Kin within easy visiting distance</td>
<td>Geographic proximity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimal kin contact</td>
<td>Regular contact</td>
<td>Daily contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family autonomy</td>
<td>Family autonomy with kin influences in decision making</td>
<td>Intergenerational authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic self-sufficiency</td>
<td>Considerable exchange of goods and services</td>
<td>Economic interdependence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonkin models of socialization</td>
<td>Kin, friendship, nonkin models of socialization</td>
<td>Kinship network as model for socialization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional support and protection from nonkin</td>
<td>Kinship complete source of emotional support and protection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Environmental and social conditions. To treat the family as an institution voluntarily constructed by its members without external pressures and constraints would be to ignore the realities of the social world.

**Nuclear and Conjugal Families**

Both nuclear and conjugal families characterize the family unit in its smallest form. Generally, this form includes the husband, the wife, and their immediate children. The terms *nuclear* and *conjugal* are at times used interchangeably; however, they are not truly synonymous. A *conjugal family* must include a husband and wife. A *nuclear family* may or may not include the marriage partners but consists of any two or more persons related to one another by birth (blood), marriage, or adoption, assuming they are of the same or adjoining generations. Thus, a brother and sister or a single parent and child are both nuclear families but would not, technically speaking, be conjugal families.

Because most persons marry, it is likely that, during their lifetimes, they will be members of two different but overlapping nuclear families. The nuclear family into which someone is born and reared (consisting of self, brothers and sisters, and parents) is termed the **family of orientation**. This is the family unit in which the first and most basic socialization processes occur. When an individual marries, he or she forms a new nuclear (and conjugal) family—a **family of procreation**. This family is composed of the individual, his or her spouse, and their children.

**Extended Families**

The term *extended family* refers to family structures that extend beyond the nuclear family. As stated, there may be multiple nuclear family groupings within the
DEFINING THE FAMILY

Extended Families in China

The clan system of traditional China was extremely important to the maintenance of ancestral linkages and group solidarity. A clan, sometimes referred to as a tsu, included all persons with a common surname who traced descent from a common ancestor. The tsu operated through a council of elders; it often involved several thousand persons—sometimes entire villages.

The significance that this large clan group had for the family can be seen in the functions the clan performed: lending money to members, helping individual families pay for extravagant weddings and funerals, establishing schools, exercising judicial authority, acting as a government agent in collecting taxes, and maintaining ancestral graves and tsu property. The clan performed most of the functions generally associated with government: taxes, law enforcement, schools, welfare, and so on. As one might guess, the tsu came under serious attack when the revolutionary government came into power.

In the contemporary Chinese family, extended family relationships show signs of change. Logan and others say there have been fundamental changes in family relationships in urban China. Arranged marriages have become less common, women are treated more equitably by their co-residing mothers-in-law than before, and there is greater autonomy for both the parent and child generations. Yet co-residence remains nearly as high in China as in some other East Asian countries—thus, much higher than in the West.

One state policy that may have deep impacts on the extended family and on intergenerational relations is the one-child family policy. Population control in the 1980s and 1990s sharply reduced fertility, with an immediate impact on the presence of grandchildren and eventual effects on the number and possibly on the gender of adult children. Clearly the one-child family will force many older people to live alone.

On the other hand, as they have fewer children, parents and grandparents may invest more in each child and, therefore, increase the likelihood of reciprocal support in old age. An only child may feel more obligation to parents. Logan and colleagues say some data suggest that parents with only one child are more likely to prefer co-residence than those with more than one and that only children are especially likely to live with parents.


CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Extended Families

The terms consanguine families and joint families are used interchangeably with extended families. Both consanguine and joint families are extended families; however, the emphasis in the consanguine family is on blood ties rather than marital ties. Thus, in a consanguineous marriage, the two partners have at least one ancestor in common, such as a marriage between third cousins or closer relatives.

Generally, it is assumed that consanguineous marriages decline in response to the forces of modernization and industrialization. But some recent evidence from Iran suggests this may not always be the case. Factors, such as an increased pool of cousins (due to lower infant mortality, for example), may actually lead to an increase in consanguinity when modernization takes place.34

The term *joint family* is not used as frequently today as in times past. The term has most often been used to describe large families in India when at least two brothers, with their own wives and children, lived together in the same household. The joint family was *consanguine* in that the brothers were related by blood and extended in that the wives of the brothers (sisters-in-law) and their children (nephews, nieces, and cousins) lived together. The family was *joint* in that there existed a common treasury, common kitchen and dining room, and common deities. This Indian form of joint family was usually patrilineal and patrilocal and emphasized filial and fraternal solidarity.

The smallest variety of extended family is the *stem family*. Normally, a stem family consists of two families in adjacent generations, joined by economic and blood ties. This type of family is quite common in Japan where, despite rapid urbanization, approximately 25 percent of middle-aged married couples live with one spouse’s parents. These stem families are most common if the marriage was arranged, the husband was the oldest son, and/or the wife was the oldest daughter and had no brothers.

Dr. Vern Bengtson, in his Burgess Award Lecture to the National Council on Family Relations, argued that family relationships across several generations are becoming increasingly important in American society. His arguments for this statement include (1) the demographic change of population aging, which results in “longer years of shared hours” between generations; (2) the increasing importance of grandparents and other kin in fulfilling family functions; and (3) the strength and resilience of intergenerational solidarity over time.

*Modified-Nuclear and Modified-Extended Families*

A number of writers have suggested that the isolated nuclear family, as well as the traditional large extended family, are largely fictitious. That is, families of procreation as well as never-married single, widowed, and divorced persons actually maintain sufficient independence to be defined as distinct units but also function within a network of other nuclear families and social networks, offering services and gifts and maintaining close contact. Thus, the idea of a modified form of nuclear or extended family has developed.

Although no clear consensus exists on where to mark the distinction between a modified-nuclear and a modified-extended family, it is clear that each type takes an intermediate position between the isolated, independent, small nuclear unit and the interdependent co-resident kin network of the extended family (see Table 1.1 on page 28). In an extended typology of family extendedness, a modified-nuclear family structure would be one where families of procreation retain considerable autonomy (e.g., independent decision making about organization of family work, socialization practices, and budgetary matters) yet maintain a coalition with other nuclear families with which they engage in a high level of exchange in terms of contact levels, financial assistance,

---

Extended family networks exist in all societies. Even in North America, the transmission of property, the proximity of residence, and the formal and informal contacts made through calls, visits, and gifts demonstrate the presence and importance of extended kin networks. Some families have reunions on a regular basis to bring old and new members together.

and in-kind assistance (e.g., child care, home maintenance, etc.). In modified-nuclear families, the different units may include other kin (e.g., a grandmother, adult siblings, or grandchildren), but do so more as a means of providing or receiving assistance than as fully integrated members of the family system. For the most part, modified-nuclear family systems maintain separate households but typically live in close proximity to one another or experience periods of more intense interaction co-residence with kin. The family living arrangements of many Latino immigrant families in the United States most resemble this type of family system.38

In contrast, in a modified-extended family structure, considerably less autonomy exists among the separate units. How children are socialized or how finances are accumulated and dispersed in one parental unit are decisions that need to be coordinated with other units. In a modified-extended family, co-residence is more likely to occur, but with considerable latitude for independent living and decision making within smaller units. When separate residence occurs, these family systems demonstrate high levels of economic interdependency. Filipino and Cambodian-American immigrant families perhaps best exemplify the co-residential nature and high economic interdependency present in these types of families.39


Glick and others suggest that the long-term downward trend in the percentage of extended family households in the United States came to a halt during the 1980s. One key factor in this change is immigration. Changes in national origin of the immigrant population have influenced increased rates of extended family living among all immigrants since 1970. Immigrants from countries closer to the United States and that are likely to send labor migrants (Mexico and Latin America) have contributed significantly to the increase in extended households. But increases in immigration from Asian countries have also made significant contributions to increasing family households. The result is a widening gap between immigrants and natives in the proportion of the U.S. population residing in extended family households.

The following section contains a closer examination of the boundaries of the kinship network and intergenerational relationships and the major importance they hold for most people today.

**Boundaries of Kinship**

**Kinship systems** involve patterns of rights, obligations, and constraints that govern the relationships between individuals in societies based on ties of blood, marriage, or adoption. Kinship norms vary widely across societies and most govern patterns

---

of residency (e.g., where newly married couples live relative to each spouse’s parents) and property relationships (e.g., inheritance of private property). These norms are important elements in how power is structured and maintained in societies, especially with respect to age and gender. Kinship systems are more elaborate and consist of more rules and norms in societies where economic production is centered around genealogical relations. In modern industrial societies, kinship takes on less significance, although such ties still maintain significance for the well-being of individuals and families. In the sections that follow, we will examine some of the key areas of life that kinships systems govern in societies and the variation that exists in how societies structure their kinship relations.

**Functions of Kinship Systems**

Keeping in mind our earlier discussion of the substitutability of institutions and the concept of functional equivalence, kinship groups and systems have tended to fulfill certain functions even when the kinship network is indistinguishable from other institutions. Some of the key functions that kinship systems have served in the past include:

1. Property holding and inheritance
2. Housing and residential proximity
3. Keeping in touch and gift giving
4. Affection, emotional ties, and primary relationships
5. Regulation of sexual relationships

A brief examination of each of these five aspects of kinship group regulation follows.

**Property Holding and Inheritance**

The holding, ownership, and control of property and the transmission of property from one owner to another are issues of central concern to family sociologists and anthropologists in general and to conflict theorists and feminists in particular. Property ownership is directly related to wealth and power, and inheritance has implications for how wealth and power are transmitted. Within family systems, this transference is directly linked to inheritance and the rules of descent.

At birth, each person inherits two separate bloodlines; thus, a key issue in most societies (less so in the United States and other Western societies) is whose bloodline, the mother’s or the father’s, is the more important. If the descent pattern is unilineal—as is true in most societies in Asia, India, and Africa—the name, property, authority, and marriage controls are traced through one line, usually the father and his bloodline. This pattern is patrilineal and helps to preserve male power in a society by concentrating property resources among men. A matrilineal pattern—a unilineal system that traces the lineage through the female line—is found much less frequently. Where it is found, however, women are likely to have more power in the family and the society; although as we shall see later, sometimes societies construct elaborate residence rules that preserve male power and privilege even when property is owned by and transferred through the female line. Finally, the system of descent most prevalent in modern societies (such as the United States), where more equality exists between the sexes, is the bilateral system in which power and property are transferred through both the mother’s and father’s lines to both males and females.
One key exception to this pattern is name. In the United States, both genders tend to assume the names of their fathers, and most wives take their husbands’ family names on marriage. This, too, may be in a process of changing, albeit slowly. Female college students were far more accepting of nontraditional name choices and more tolerant of choices made by others. Even so, more than 80 percent of females said that if they marry, they plan to change their last name to that of their husband. Women planning to marry at a later age and expecting nontraditional work roles were less likely than other women to want to change their last name to that of their husband.

Patterns of descent take on special significance to many feminists and conflict theorists (see Chapter 3) for several reasons. First of all, most family systems throughout the world tend to perpetuate power and wealth through successive generations, that is, the rich stay rich and the poor stay poor. Also, most family systems differentiate this power and wealth between the sexes, with males receiving preferential treatment. The result is that class and sexual inequalities are built into most family systems, such that the inequalities come to be viewed as natural and legitimate. In other words, some families have the right to be wealthier than others, males are expected to be dominant, and females are supposed to submit to their male counterparts.

Housing and Residential Proximity

All family systems have rules of residence that establish who lives where and with whom. Because husbands and wives come from different families and most spouses choose to share the same residence, to achieve this one or both individuals must move.

The most common residential pattern is patrilocal, in which the bride changes residence and lives with the parents of the groom. In the matrilocal pattern, which is much less frequently found, the newlywed couple lives with the parents of the bride. In most Western countries, including the United States, far more common than either of the preceding are the bilocal system, in which the couple lives near the parents of either spouse, and the neolocal system, in which the couple lives in a home of their own that may be located apart from both sets of parents. Perhaps the most unusual type of residence rule, found in societies with matrilineal descent systems, is avunculocal. In the avunculocal system, a son goes to live with his maternal uncle (his mother’s brother) when he attains adulthood and his new wife goes to live with him there when they are married. In this way, the property is handed down through the female line, but the property is controlled by a male of her line. The male who inherits the property then accepts his sister’s adult male child (his nephew) into his household and this child will inherit the property in the next generation. His own male child will go to live with his wife’s brother to continue her line. In this way, the property remains in the control of the males of each generation, but male heirs to the property continue to be provided by the same female line from generation to generation. Such a system preserves male power in a society where the property is invested in women.

DEFINING THE FAMILY

The pattern of residence takes on a special significance for the third and fourth aspects of kinship, namely, obligation and emotional ties among kin. Helping patterns and showing affection to grandparents, parents, and siblings take on different character depending on whether the people involved share the same building, live in the same neighborhood or community, or reside hundreds of miles apart. Research on transnational families, however, suggests that such obligations can withstand vast geographical distances in a world made smaller by technology.42

Data from the 1980s suggest that residence patterns in the United States show a surprising degree of local concentration. In the study of Middletown, for example, taking any resident of the city at random, the odds were one in five that a brother or sister also lived in the city; one in three that one or both parents lived there; and two in five that a more distant relative (a grandparent, aunt, uncle, or cousin) lived there.43 The respondents’ immediate families were especially concentrated, with 54 percent of the grown children, 43 percent of the parents, and 31 percent of the brothers and sisters living right in Middletown.44 These percentages increased considerably when a 50-mile radius was used to establish residence. Thus, although a newlywed couple may establish a residence separate from their parents, it tends to be in geographical proximity to parents and siblings.

Keeping in Touch and Gift Giving

Around the world, it is expected that kin communicate or keep in touch, particularly with parents, to a lesser extent with siblings, and even less so with other relatives such as aunts, uncles, and cousins. Many extended families have a person who could be considered a kinkeeper, usually a female, who works at keeping the family members in touch with one another.45

In the 1980s, the main determinants of the amount of interaction between relatives in Middletown were the distance between their homes and the closeness of their relationships. With increasing distance, visiting was replaced by telephone calls, which was replaced by letter writing. Almost no one corresponded regularly with cousins, except perhaps through exchanging Christmas cards. Consistently, women did more joint activities with parents and other kin than did men.

In the new millennium, with advances in Internet availability and usage, the importance of distance as a determinant of contact with both friends and relatives is only slightly reduced. In a study of “Netville”—a new and highly “wired” suburb of Toronto, Canada—contact with kin among new residents was only increased by Internet usage when distances were within 50 to 500 kilometers. The greater availability and use of the Internet in this community had less impact at shorter or greater distances.46 Furthermore, other studies have shown little impact of Internet usage on kinship exchanges47 and a maintenance of the traditional allocation of kinkeeping tasks (even those involving Internet connections) to women.48

In addition to the maintenance of social contacts, it often is expected that services or gifts be shared among relatives as gestures of goodwill and kindness. Gift giving, whether with friends or family, tends to cement social relationships. The gifts may be material or nonmaterial: presents of food (having guests for dinner), lodging (offering guests a place to stay in one’s home), and care or help. Data from the Netherlands that examined gift giving in Western societies revealed that gifts are

44Ibid., 203.
given approximately to the same extent to extended kin and to friends, but gifts to friends seem to be given more out of affection than out of obligation. Gift giving to extended kin is more obligatory, but at the same time it is more enduring than giving to friends.

These patterns may be undergoing change, however, as conditions of modernity break down obligations based on family and kinship and replace them with obligations of the state to individuals. In Sweden, arguably the most modern of nation states, kinship obligations are more motivated by and dependent on emotional bonds than on need or obligation. This shift in motivations for gift giving may be attributable not only to the emergence of a modern welfare state that relieves families of much of their obligations to support kin but also to a transformation of the meaning of family relations from bonds of obligation to bonds of psycho-emotional content and love.

**Affection and Primary Relationships**

Affection and primary relationships are the emotional dimensions of visits, calls, and letters. Affection means being emotionally close to kin. Women seem to be the “specialists” in affectionate kin relationships. In Middletown, as elsewhere, women expressed more affection than men for every category of relative. The distribution of affection was highest for mothers, next highest for fathers and near siblings, and lowest for best-known cousins.

With age, the affection dimension seems to increase between children and parents but weaken with kin such as cousins. In Middletown, the increased closeness to parents was attributed to children’s own maturity, their parental experience, the related recognition of the emotional debt they owe, the relaxation of parental authority, the increased needs of parents, and the expectation of bereavement. It can be said that, in Middletown, as well as elsewhere, most people feel good about their parents, love them, and make sacrifices for them when necessary. And, there has been little evidence of any weakening of kinship ties during the past fifty years.

**Regulation of Sexual Relationships**

The most widely used example of a universal norm is a taboo on incest. All societies forbid sexual relations between persons in certain kinship positions, particularly those within and closest to the nuclear family: father and daughter, mother and son, brother and sister, stepfather and stepdaughter, and the like. Violations of these norms arouse strong feelings among the kinship group as well as in the larger society. In societies organized primarily around family ties, it is unsettling to imagine the confusion of statuses and role expectations that would result if fathers and daughters or mothers and sons had offspring. Consider, for example, a female child born to a mother–son relationship. The child would be a daughter to her brother, a sister to her father, a granddaughter to her own mother, a stepdaughter to her grandfather, and so forth. Should her father, who is also her brother, discipline her as a parent or treat her as a sibling? Could she marry her stepfather, who is her

---


51 Caplow et al., *Middletown Families*, 220.
grandfather, if he divorced her mother? In modern societies, however, such distinctions of position in families may have less importance. Why then a continuation of this taboo against incest? Perhaps the reason lies in the heightened focus and value on the psycho-emotional development and well-being of individuals as well as the required intimacy in family relations and the extreme power differences between parents and children. Without strong normative guidelines against incest, the potential for negative psycho-emotional consequences from the abuse of trust in close relationships is increased.

In addition to kinship sexual restrictions, all societies also forbid intermarriage between certain kinship group members. The circle of prohibited relatives for marriage does, however, vary widely in different societies. One extreme, ancient Egypt, permitted brother–sister and father–daughter marriages. The other extreme may be represented by the traditional clan system of China and by certain extended families in India, where the prohibition extended to a very wide group of relatives, including cousins to the sixth degree. In between is the (not uncommon) practice of cousin marriage, which many societies practice as a means of strengthening cultural continuity across generations by assuring that both husbands and wives have been socialized in the same context of beliefs, values, and norms. In fact, Martin Ottenheimer argues that the American prohibition against cousin marriage is based less on concerns about genetics and health outcomes and more on the desire to disrupt this practice among immigrants and thereby increase levels of assimilation into the dominant value system of the time.52

Summary

1. Traditionally and legally, the family refers to two or more persons related by birth, marriage, or adoption and who reside together in a household. This definition emphasizes membership criteria or the structural component of families. It was noted as well that families can also be defined functionally in terms of what they do and relationally in terms of the nature of their members’ interactions with each other. Regardless of which dimension of family life is emphasized, however, it is important to keep in mind that definitions of the family are social constructions and, therefore, arbitrary to some degree.

2. From a sociological perspective, we are interested in families as both institutions and social systems or groups. The family, as a social institution, is an organized, formal, and regular system of carrying out certain tasks in society. The family is defined by a wide system of norms that organizes family units into stable and ongoing social systems. These norms reflect societal needs but are also shaped by systems of power and conflict because how a society defines its institutions has implications for structures of power, inequality, and conflict in the society. As sociologists, we are interested in how these norms develop, are maintained, and change.

3. In addition to the institutional definitions of family that develop in a society, we are also interested in families as analytical units or as special types of social groups with predictable characteristics that help us understand their behavior and the behaviors of their members. As social systems or groups, families can be characterized by their intergenerational composition, their mix of both primary and secondary functions, and their relations of interdependence and duration. As a primary group, the family is small in size and has frequent and intense contact among members. As a secondary group, its relations are more formal and involve the impersonal contacts that characterize much of an individual’s life.

4. In studying and comparing family systems across societies and cultures, sociologists utilize ideal types. Ideal-type constructs provide a means of illustrating the range of perspectives between two extremes along

DEFINING THE FAMILY

a continuum. This tool can be used to examine major issues in the U.S. family, evaluating traditional and nontraditional norms. Each issue involves conflict as a result of social change; that is, traditional patterns coexist with nontraditional patterns. If there were no change or if there were total change, no conflicts or issues would exist.

5. The boundaries of marriage are not always precise and clearly defined, and a great deal of variation exists within and across societies in both the definition and the practice of marriage. The major variations in marriage are based on the number of spouses, specifically the practice of either monogamy or polygamy. Polygyny and polyandry, two forms of polygamy, occur in a wide range of contexts and take numerous forms. The plural spouses may be brothers or sisters, may marry simultaneously or sequentially, and may perform various functions. Although polygyny is very common, polyandry is quite rare. Group marriage also occurs extremely infrequently and may never have existed as a viable and lasting form of marriage for any society in the world.

6. As with marriage, the boundaries of the family also vary considerably. How the boundaries of the family change will depend on the needs of the society, the needs and preferences of the individuals in the family, and the structures of conflict and power.

7. One typology of family structures differentiates the nuclear/conjugal unit from a variety of extended units. Some of these include families of orientation and procreation; modified-nuclear and modified-extended families; and consanguine, joint, and stem families.

8. The boundaries of kinship serve as an extension of those of the marital and family units. A universal taboo on incest consists of norms that specify eligible sexual and marital partners.

9. Kinship systems have key functions and characteristics that include property holding and inheritance, housing and maintenance of residential proximity, obligation or helping in time of need, and affection and emotional ties.

Having considered the concept of the family as a social construction, the next chapter looks at how the family has been structured and defined in the United States historically and today. The purpose of Chapter 2 is to examine the variety of family experiences and definitions in contemporary U.S. society and to provide an understanding of how family structures are not independent of the structures of other institutions. We will also consider briefly some of the key issues in contemporary U.S. family life that will be addressed more fully throughout the book.

Key Terms and Topics

Social constructions p. 5
Ideology p. 5
Institutional definitions p. 7
Analytical definition p. 7
Social institution p. 8
Institutionalize p. 8
Functional equivalence p. 11
Family systems p. 12
Primary group p. 15
Internal social control p. 16
Secondary group p. 16
Ideal-type constructs p. 18
Monogamy p. 20
Polygamy p. 20
Bigamy p. 20
Polygyny p. 20
Polyandry p. 20
Group marriage p. 20
Sequential or serial monogamy p. 21
Sex ratio p. 21
Levirate p. 22
Sororate p. 23
Affluent polygyny p. 24
Intervention polygyny p. 24
Conjugal family p. 28
Nuclear family p. 28
Family of orientation p. 28
Family of procreation p. 28
Extended family p. 28
Consanguine family p. 29
Joint family p. 30
Stem family p. 30
Modified-nuclear family structure p. 30
Modified-extended family structure p. 31
Kinship systems p. 32
Unilineal p. 33
Patrilineal p. 33
Matrilineal p. 33
Discussion Questions

1. If the meaning of family is socially constructed, does this mean the definition is totally arbitrary and we can define a family any way we want? Or can we talk about “the family” as a necessary part of existence in human societies?

2. What is meant by the phrase family as a social institution? Do long-term committed relationships formed by same-sex couples, single mothers with children born outside of marriage, cohabiting couples, and married working mothers who put their children in daycare for 40 hours each week constitute legitimate families?

3. What do changes in American society such as increases in the prevalence of cohabitation and the use of daycares to care for and socialize children tell us about the institution of “the family”? What do these changes and comparisons with other modern societies tell us about the institutionalization process and the changeable nature of institutions and their relationships with other institutions in a society?

4. Differentiate family groups from family systems. Since systems are abstractions, of what relevance are family systems to understanding the family?

5. Describe what would likely happen to a person who was removed from all primary-group relationships. Why are such relationships so crucial?

6. Define the terms marriage and family in a way that would be comprehensive enough to include marriages and families in most societies in the world. How are the two terms similar and different? How do marriage and family differ from other groups and relationships? Should gays and lesbians be able to marry, divorce, adopt children, and form families? Why?

7. Why is monogamy so strongly stressed in the United States as the appropriate form of marriage? What is your theory for monogamy as opposed to polygyny? What advantages or disadvantages do monogamy, polygyny, polyandry, and group marriage have for adults in the United States?

8. In societies where polygamy is culturally accepted, polygyny appears to be far more common than polyandry. Why? What factors explain exceptions that occur?

9. Think of your own kin group. How many persons in it do you know (uncles, cousins, and so on)? With how many kin do you have contact via email and the Internet? With how many do you exchange birthday or holiday greetings? How many do you visit regularly? Based on your personal experience, is the extended family merely a thing of the past or is it alive today as well?

10. How would you explain the universal norm of a taboo on incest? Within your own kinship system, what relatives (second cousins, step-siblings, and so forth) are considered to be legitimate sexual or marital partners?

11. What arguments will feminists and conflict theorists likely make about traditional unilineal descent and inheritance systems?

Further Readings


A cross-cultural look at recent empirical research on families in 25 different countries around the world divided by region.


Examines the different ways that debates about the definition of family and family life have been used in political discourse to support and promote national identity and national policies in America.

Nine anthropologists describe what “being related” does for people in localities such as Africa, China, India, Alaska, and Europe.


One of the foremost scholars in the area of family sociology examines the process of de-institutionalization in the area of marriage and family life.


One of the few sociological examinations of a widespread practice in American families—transnational adoptions—this book considers how this transnational family practice intersects with traditional notions of kinship and shows how these families are redefining kinship outside of a national context.


An examination of family life around the globe in comparison to Western families done from a gendered perspective with an emphasis on globalization.


A look at the values centering around gay and lesbian politics: family agendas, rights, children, and other issues.


Although recommended reading for a general and excellent cross-cultural perspective on family structure, the book also extensively analyzes sexual patterns and incest.


An exploration of a variety of practices including monogamy, polygamy, and group marriage as implemented by intentional communities in dealing with family life.


Another look at how debates about the family intersect with constructions of national identity.