Chapter 10
Marriage and Family
Hold still. We’re going to be late,” said Sharon as she tried to put shoes on 2-year-old Michael, who kept squirming away.

Finally succeeding with the shoes, Sharon turned to 4-year-old Brittany, who was trying to pull a brush through her hair. “It’s stuck, Mom,” Brittany said.

“Well, no wonder. Just how did you get gum in your hair? I don’t have time for this, Brittany. We’ve got to leave.”

Getting to the van fifteen minutes behind schedule, Sharon strapped the kids in, and then herself. Just as she was about to pull away, she remembered that she had not checked the fridge for messages.

“Just a minute, kids. I’ll be right back.”

Running into the house, she frantically searched for a note from Tom. She vaguely remembered him mumbling something about being held over at work. She grabbed the Post-It and ran back to the van.

“He’s picking on me,” complained Brittany when her mother climbed back in.

“Oh, shut up, Brittany. He’s only 2. He can’t pick on you.”

“Yes, he did,” Brittany said, crossing her arms defiantly as she stretched out her foot to kick her brother’s seat.

“Oh, no! How did Mikey get that smudge on his face? Did you do that, Brit?”

Brittany crossed her arms again, pushing out her lips in her classic pouting pose.

As Sharon drove to the day care center, she tried to calm herself. “Only two more days of work this week, and then the weekend. Then I can catch up on housework and have a little relaxed time with the kids. And Tom can finally cut the grass and buy the groceries,” she thought. “And maybe we’ll even have time to make love. Boy, that’s been a long time.”

At a traffic light, Sharon found time to read Tom’s note. “Oh, no. That’s what he meant. He has to work Saturday. Well, there go those plans.”

What Sharon didn’t know was that her boss had also made plans for Sharon’s Saturday. And that their emergency Saturday babysitter wouldn’t be available. And that Michael was coming down with the flu. And that Brittany would follow next. And that . . .
“There just isn’t enough time to get everything done!” Most of us have this complaint, but it is especially true for working parents of young children. Unlike parents in the past, today’s young parents find themselves without the support that used to be taken for granted: stay-at-home moms who provided stability to the neighborhood, husbands whose sole income was enough to support a wife and several children, a safe neighborhood where even small children could play outside, and grandmas who could pitch in during emergencies.

Those days are gone, most likely forever. Today, more and more families are like Sharon and Tom’s. They are harried, working more but haunted by debt, and seeming to have less time for one another. In this chapter, we shall try to understand what is happening to the U.S. family and to families worldwide.

Marriage and Family in Global Perspective

To better understand U.S. patterns of marriage and family, let’s first look at how customs differ around the world. This will give us a context for interpreting our own experience with this vital social institution.

What Is a Family?

“What is a family, anyway?” asked William Sayres in an article on this topic. In posing this question, he (1992) meant that although the family is so significant to humanity that it is universal—every human group in the world organizes its members in families—the world’s cultures display so much variety that the term family is difficult to define. For example, although the Western world regards a family as a husband, wife, and children, other groups have family forms in which men have more than one wife (polygyny) or women more than one husband (polyandry). How about the obvious? Can we define the family as the approved group into which children are born? Then we would be overlooking the Banaro of New Guinea. In this group, a young woman must give birth before she can marry—and she cannot marry the father of her child (Murdock 1949).

What if we were to define the family as the unit in which parents are responsible for disciplining children and providing for their material needs? This, too, is not universal. Among the Trobriand Islanders, it is not the parents but the wife’s eldest brother who is responsible for providing the children’s discipline and their food (Malinowski 1927).

Such remarkable variety means that we have to settle for a broad definition. A family consists of people who consider themselves related by blood, marriage, or adoption. A household, in contrast, consists of people who occupy the same housing unit—a house, apartment, or other living quarters.

We can classify families as nuclear (husband, wife, and children) and extended (including people such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins in addition to the nuclear unit). Sociologists also refer to the family of orientation (the family in which an individual grows up) and the family of procreation (the family that is formed when a couple has its first child).

What Is Marriage?

We have the same problem here. For just about every element you might regard as essential to marriage, some group has a different custom.

Consider the sex of the bride and groom. Until recently, this was taken-for-granted. Then in the 1980s and 1990s, several European
countries legalized same-sex marriages. In 2003, so did Canada, followed by several U.S. states. In 2008, California approved same-sex marriages, and a few months later banned them.

Same-sex marriages sound so new, but when Columbus landed in the Americas, some Native American tribes were already practicing same-sex marriages. Through a ceremony called the *berdache*, a man or woman who wanted to be a member of the opposite sex was officially declared to have his or her sex changed. The “new” man or woman put on the clothing of the opposite sex, performed the tasks associated with his or her new sex, and was allowed to marry.

Even sexual relationships don’t universally characterize marriage. The Nayar of Malabar never allow a bride and groom to have sex. After a three-day celebration of the marriage, they send the groom packing—and never allow him to see his bride again (La Barre 1954). This can be a little puzzling to figure out, but it works like this: The groom is “borrowed” from another tribe for the ceremony. Although the Nayar bride can’t have sex with her husband, after the marriage she can have approved lovers from her tribe. This system keeps family property intact—along matrilineal lines.

At least one thing has to be universal in marriage—that the bride and groom are alive. So you would think. But even in such a basic matter we find an exception. On the Loess Plateau in China, if a man dies without a wife, his parents look for a dead woman to be his bride. After finding one—from parents willing to sell their dead unmarried daughter—the dead man and woman are married and then buried together. Happy that their son will have intimacy in the afterlife, the parents throw a party to celebrate the marriage (Fremson 2006). This is an ancient Chinese practice, and it used to be that the couple was buried in a double coffin (Yao 2002).

With such encompassing cultural variety, we can define marriage this way—a group’s approved mating arrangements, usually marked by a ritual of some sort (the wedding) to indicate the couple’s new public status.

**Common Cultural Themes**

Despite this diversity, several common themes run through marriage and family. As Table 10.1 illustrates, all societies use marriage and family to establish patterns of mate selection, descent, inheritance, and authority. Let’s look at these patterns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Traditional Societies</th>
<th>Industrial (and Postindustrial) Societies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the structure of marriage?</td>
<td><em>Extended</em> (marriage embeds spouses in a large kinship network of explicit obligations)</td>
<td><em>Nuclear</em> (marriage brings fewer obligations toward the spouse’s relatives)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the functions of marriage?</td>
<td>Encompassing (see the six functions listed on p. 465)</td>
<td>More limited (many functions are fulfilled by other social institutions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who holds authority?</td>
<td><em>Patriarchal</em> (authority is held by males)</td>
<td>Although some patriarchal features remain, authority is divided more equally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many spouses at one time?</td>
<td>Most have one spouse (<em>monogamy</em>), while some have several (<em>polygamy</em>)</td>
<td>One spouse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who selects the spouse?</td>
<td>Parents, usually the father, select the spouse</td>
<td>Individuals choose their own spouse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where does the couple live?</td>
<td>Couples usually reside with the groom’s family (<em>patrilocal residence</em>), less commonly with the bride’s family (<em>matrilocal residence</em>)</td>
<td>Couples establish a new home (<em>neolocal residence</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How is descent figured?</td>
<td>Usually figured from male ancestors (<em>patrilineal kinship</em>), less commonly from female ancestors (<em>matrilineal kinship</em>)</td>
<td>Figured from male and female ancestors equally (<em>bilineal kinship</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How is inheritance figured?</td>
<td>Rigid system of rules; usually patrilineal, but can be matrilineal</td>
<td>Highly individualistic; usually bilineal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: By the author.
Mate Selection. Each human group establishes norms to govern who marries whom. If a group has norms of endogamy, it specifies that its members must marry within their group. For example, some groups prohibit interracial marriage. In some societies, these norms are written into law, but in most cases they are informal. In the United States, most whites marry whites, and most African Americans marry African Americans—not because of any laws but because of informal norms. In contrast, norms of exogamy specify that people must marry outside their group. The best example of exogamy is the incest taboo, which prohibits sex and marriage among designated relatives.

As you can see from Table 10.1 on the previous page, how people find mates varies around the world, from fathers selecting them, with no input from those who are to marry, to the highly individualistic, personal choices common in Western cultures. Changes in mate selection are the focus of the Sociology and the New Technology box on the next page.

Descent. How are you related to your father’s father or to your mother’s mother? The answer to this question is not the same all over the world. Each society has a system of descent, the way people trace kinship over generations. We use a bilineal system, for we think of ourselves as related to both our mother’s and our father’s sides of the family. “Doesn’t everyone?” you might ask. Ours, however, is only one logical way to reckon descent. Some groups use a patrilineal system, tracing descent only on the father’s side; they don’t think of children as being related to their mother’s relatives. Others follow a matrilineal system, tracing descent only on the mother’s side, and not considering children to be related to their father’s relatives. The Naxi of China, for example, don’t even have a word for father (Hong 1999).

Inheritance. Marriage and family—in whatever form is customary in a society—are also used to determine rights of inheritance. In a bilineal system, property is passed to both males and females, in a patrilineal system only to males, and in a matrilineal system (the rarest form), only to females. No system is natural. Rather, each matches a group’s ideas of justice and logic.

Authority. Historically, some form of patriarchy, a social system in which men dominate women, has formed a thread that runs through all societies. Contrary to what some think, there are no historical records of a true matriarchy, a social system in which women as a group dominate men as a group. Our marriage and family customs, then, developed within a framework of patriarchy. Although U.S. family patterns are becoming more egalitarian, or equal, some of today’s customs still reflect their patriarchal origin. One of the most obvious examples is U.S. naming patterns. Despite some changes, the typical bride still takes the groom’s last name, and children usually receive the father’s last name.

Marriage and Family in Theoretical Perspective

As we have seen, human groups around the world have many forms of mate selection, ways to trace descent, and ways to view the parent’s responsibility. Although these patterns are arbitrary, each group perceives its own forms of marriage and family as natural. Now let’s see what pictures emerge when we view marriage and family theoretically.

The Functionalist Perspective: Functions and Dysfunctions

Functionalists stress that to survive, a society must fulfill basic functions (that is, meet its basic needs). When functionalists look at marriage and family, they examine how they are related to other parts of society, especially the ways that marriage and family contribute to the well-being of society.
Finding a Mate: Not the Same as It Used to Be

Things haven’t changed entirely. Boys and girls still get interested in each other at their neighborhood schools, and men and women still meet at college. Friends still serve as matchmakers and introduce friends, hoping they might click. People still meet at churches and bars, at the mall and at work.

But the Internet is bringing fundamental changes. Dating sites advertise that they offer thousands of potential companions, lovers, or spouses. For a low monthly fee, you can meet the person of your dreams.

The photos on these sites are fascinating. Some seem to be lovely people, warm, attractive, and vivacious, and one wonders why they are posting their photos and personal information online. Do they have some secret flaw that they need to do this? Others seem okay, although perhaps a bit needy. Then there are the pitiful, and one wonders whether they will ever find a mate, or even a hookup, for that matter. Some are desperate, begging for someone—anyone—to contact them: women who try for sexy poses, exposing too much flesh, suggesting the promise of at least a good time, and men who try their best to look like hulks, their muscular presence promising the same.

The Internet dating sites are not filled with losers, although there are plenty of them. Many regular, ordinary people post their profiles, too. And some do find the person of their dreams—or at least adequate matches. With Internet postings losing their stigma, electronic matchmaking is becoming an acceptable way to find a mate.

Matchmaking sites tout “thousands of eligible prospects.” Unfortunately, the prospects are spread over the nation, and few people want to invest in a plane ticket only to find that the “prospect” doesn’t even resemble the posted photo. You can do a search for your area, but there are likely to be few candidates from it.

Not to worry. More technology to the rescue. The ease and comfort of “dating on demand.” You sit at home, turn on your TV, and use your remote to search for your partner. Your local cable company has done all the hard work—hosting singles events at bars and malls, where they tape singles talking about themselves and what they are looking for in a mate (Grant 2005).

You can view the videos free. And if you get interested in someone, for just a small fee you can contact the individual.

Now all you need to do is to hire a private detective—also available online for another fee—to see if this engaging person is already married, has a dozen kids, has been sued for paternity or child support, or is a child molester or a rapist.

For Your Consideration
What is your opinion of electronic dating sites? Have you used one? Would you consider using an electronic dating site (if you were single and unattached)? Why or why not?

Why the Family Is Universal. Although the form of marriage and family varies from one group to another, the family is universal. The reason for this, say functionalists, is that the family fulfills six needs that are basic to the survival of every society. These needs, or functions, are (1) economic production, (2) socialization of children, (3) care of the sick and aged, (4) recreation, (5) sexual control, and (6) reproduction. To make certain that these functions are performed, every human group has adopted some form of the family.
Functions of the Incest Taboo. Functionalists note that the incest taboo helps families to avoid role confusion. This, in turn, facilitates the socialization of children. For example, if father—daughter incest were allowed, how should a wife treat her daughter—as a daughter, as a subservient second wife, or even as a rival? Should the daughter consider her mother as a mother, as the first wife, or as a rival? Would her father be a father or a lover? And would the wife be the husband’s main wife, a secondary wife—or even the “mother of the other wife” (whatever role that might be)? And if the daughter had a child by her father, what relationships would everyone have? Maternal incest would also lead to complications every bit as confusing as these.

The incest taboo also forces people to look outside the family for marriage partners. Anthropologists theorize that exogamy was especially functional in tribal societies, for it forged alliances between tribes that otherwise might have killed each other off. Today, exogamy still extends both the bride’s and the groom’s social networks by adding and building relationships with their spouse’s family and friends.

Isolation and Emotional Overload. As you know, functionalists also analyze dysfunctions. One of those dysfunctions comes from the relative isolation of today’s nuclear family. Because extended families are enmeshed in large kinship networks, their members can count on many people for material and emotional support. In nuclear families, in contrast, the stresses that come with crises such as the loss of a job—or even the routine pressures of a harried life, as depicted in our opening vignette—are spread among fewer people. This places greater strain on each family member, creating emotional overload. In addition, the relative isolation of the nuclear family makes it vulnerable to a “dark side”—incest and various other forms of abuse, matters that we examine later in this chapter.

The Conflict Perspective: Struggles Between Husbands and Wives

Anyone who has been married or who has seen a marriage from the inside knows that—despite a couple’s best intentions—conflict is a part of marriage. Conflict inevitably arises between two people who live intimately and who share most everything in life—from their goals and checkbooks to their bedroom and children. At some point, their desires and approaches to life clash, sometimes mildly and sometimes quite harshly. Conflict among married people is so common that it is the grist of soap operas, movies, songs, and novels.

Throughout the generations, power has been a major source of conflict between wives and husbands: Husbands have had much more power, and wives have resented it. In the United States, as you know, the change has been far-reaching. Do you think that one day wives will have more power than their husbands? Maybe they already do. Look at Figure 10.1. Based on a national sample, this figure shows who makes decisions concerning the family’s finances and purchases, what to do on the weekends, and even what to watch on television. As you can see, wives now have more control over the family purse and make more of these decisions than do their husbands. These findings are a surprise, and we await confirmation by future studies.

For those marriages marked by the heat of conflict or the coldness of indifference, divorce is a common solution. Divorce can mark the end of the relationship and its problems, or it can merely indicate a changed legal relationship within which the couple’s problems persist as they continue to quarrel about finances and children. We will return to the topic of divorce later in this chapter.

The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective: Gender, Housework, and Child Care

Changes in Traditional Orientations. Throughout the generations, housework and child care have been regarded as “women's work,” and men have resisted getting involved. As more women began to work for wages, however, men came to feel pressure to do housework and to be more involved in the care of their children. But no man wanted to be thought of as a sissy or under the control of a woman, a sharp conflict with his culturally rooted feelings of
manhood and the reputation he wanted to maintain among his friends and family.

As women put in more hours at paid work, men gradually began to do more housework and to take on more responsibility for the care of their children. When men first began to change diapers—at least openly—it was big news. Comedians even told jokes about Mr. Mom, giving expression to common concerns about a future of feminized men. (Could Mr. Mom go to war and defend the country?)

Ever so slowly, cultural ideas changed, and housework, care of children, and paid labor came to be regarded as the responsibilities of both men and women. (And ever so gradually, women have become soldiers.) Let’s examine these changing responsibilities in the family.

**Who Does What?** Figure 10.2 illustrates several significant changes that have taken place in U.S. families. The first is likely to surprise you. If you look closely at this figure, you will see that not only are husbands spending more time taking care of the children but so are wives. This is fascinating: *Both* husbands and wives are spending more time in child care.

How can children be getting more attention from their parents than they used to? This flies in the face of our mythical past, the Leave-It-to-Beaver images that color our perception of the present. It also contradicts images like that in our opening vignette, of both mothers and fathers working as they struggle to support themselves and their children. We know that

In Hindu marriages, the roles of husband and wife are firmly established. Neither this woman, whom I photographed in Chittoor, India, nor her husband question whether she should carry the family wash to the village pump. Women here have done this task for millennia. As India industrializes, as happened in the West, who does the wash will be questioned—and may eventually become a source of strain in marriage.

**FIGURE 10.2 In Two-Paycheck Marriages, How Do Husbands and Wives Divide Up Their Responsibilities?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Husbands</th>
<th>Wives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>60.1</td>
<td>59.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>56.0</td>
<td>54.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>52.4</td>
<td>52.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>48.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* By the author. Based on Bianchi et al. 2006. Housework hours are from Table 5.1, child care from Table 4.1, and work hours and total hours from Table 3.4. Other services is derived by subtracting the hours for housework, child care, and paid work from the total hours.
families are not leisurely lolling through their days as huge paychecks flow in, so if parents are spending more time with their children, just where is the time coming from?

Today’s parents are squeezing out more hours for their children by spending less time on social activities and by participating less in organizations. But this accounts for only some of the time. Look again at Figure 10.2, but this time focus on the hours that husbands and wives spend doing housework. Although men are doing more housework than they used to, women are spending so much less time on housework that the total hours that husbands and wives spend on housework have dropped from 38.9 to 29.1 hours a week. This leaves a lot more time to spend with the children.

Does this mean that today’s parents aren’t as fussy about housework as their parents were, and today’s houses are dirtier and messier? That is one possibility. Or technology could be the explanation. Perhaps microwaves, dishwashers, more efficient washing machines and clothes dryers, and wrinkle-free clothing have saved hours of drudgery, leaving home hygiene about the same as before (Bianchi et al. 2006). The time savings from the “McDonaldization” we discussed in Chapter 7, with people eating more “fast foods,” is also substantial. It is likely that both explanations are true.

Finally, from Figure 10.2, you can see that husbands and wives spend their time differently. In what sociologists call a gendered division of labor, husbands still take the primary responsibility for earning the income and wives the primary responsibility for taking care of the house and children. You can also see that a shift is taking place in this traditional gender orientation: Wives are spending more time earning the family income, while husbands are spending more time on housework and child care. In light of these trends and with changing ideas of gender—of what is considered appropriate for husbands and wives—we can anticipate greater marital equality in the future.

The Family Life Cycle

We have seen how the forms of marriage and family vary widely, looked at marriage and family theoretically, and examined major changes in family relationships. Now let’s discuss love, courtship, and the family life cycle.

Love and Courtship in Global Perspective

Until recently, social scientists thought that romantic love originated in western Europe during the medieval period (Mount 1992). This is strange, for ancient accounts, such as Genesis and 1 Samuel in the Old Testament, record stories of romantic love. When anthropologists William Jankowiak and Edward Fischer (1992) surveyed the data available on 166 societies around the world, they found that romantic love—people being sexually attracted to one another and idealizing each other—showed up in 88 percent (147) of these groups. Ideas of love, however, can differ dramatically from one society to another. As the Cultural Diversity box on the next page details, for example, Indians don’t expect love to occur until after marriage.

Because love plays such a significant role in Western life—and often is regarded as the only proper basis for marriage—social scientists have probed this concept with the tools of the trade: experiments, questionnaires, interviews, and observations. In a fascinating experiment, psychologists Donald Dutton and Arthur Aron discovered that fear can produce romantic love (Rubin 1985). Here’s what they did.

About 230 feet above the Capilano River in North Vancouver, British Columbia, a rickety footbridge sways in the wind. It makes you feel like you might fall into the rocky gorge below. A more solid footbridge crosses only ten feet above the shallow stream.

The experimenters had an attractive woman approach men who were crossing these bridges. She told them she was studying “the effects of exposure to scenic attractions on creative expression.” She showed them a picture, and they wrote down their associations. The sexual imagery in their stories showed that the men on the unsteady, frightening bridge were more sexually aroused than were the men on the solid bridge. More of these men also called the young woman afterward—supposedly to get information about the study.
Cultural Diversity around the World

East Is East and West Is West: Love and Arranged Marriage in India

Arun Bharat Ram returned to India with a degree from the University of Michigan, his mother announced that she wanted to find him a wife. Arun would be a good catch anywhere: 27 years old, educated, well-mannered, intelligent, handsome—and, not incidentally, heir to a huge fortune.

Arun’s mother already had someone in mind. Manju came from a middle-class family and was a college graduate. Arun and Manju met in a coffee shop at a luxury hotel—along with both sets of parents. He found her pretty and quiet. He liked that. She was impressed that he didn’t boast about his background.

After four more meetings, including one at which the two young people met by themselves, the parents asked their children whether they were willing to marry. Neither had any major objections.

The Prime Minister of India and fifteen hundred other guests came to the wedding.

“I didn’t love him,” Manju says. “But when we talked, we had a lot in common.” She then adds, “But now I couldn’t live without him. I’ve never thought of another man since I met him.”

Despite India’s many changes, parents still arrange about 90 percent of marriages. Unlike the past, however, today’s couples have veto power over their parents’ selection. Another innovation is that the prospective bride and groom are allowed to talk to each other before the wedding—unheard of a generation or two ago.

Why do Indians have arranged marriages? And why does this practice persist, even among the educated and upper classes? We can also ask why the United States has such an individualistic approach to marriage.

The answers to these questions take us to two sociological principles. First, a group’s marriage practices match its patterns of social stratification. Arranged marriages in India affirm caste lines by channeling marriage within the same caste. Unchaperoned dating would encourage premarital sex, which, in turn, would break down family lines. Virginity at marriage, in contrast, assures the upper castes that they know who fathered the children. Consequently, Indians socialize their children to think that parents have superior wisdom in these matters. In the United States, where family lines are less important and caste is an alien concept, the practice of young people choosing their own dating partners mirrors the relative openness of our social class system.

These different backgrounds have produced contrasting ideas of love. Americans idealize love as something mysterious, a passion that suddenly seizes an individual. Indians view love as a peaceful feeling that develops when a man and a woman are united in intimacy and share life’s interests and goals. For Americans, love just “happens,” while for Indians the right conditions create love. Marriage is one of those right conditions.

The end result is this startling difference: For Americans, love produces marriage—while for Indians, marriage produces love.

For Your Consideration

What advantages do you see to the Indian approach to love and marriage? Could the Indian system work in the United States? Why or why not? Do you think that love can be created? Or does love suddenly “seize” people? What do you think love is anyway?

You may have noticed that this research was really about sexual attraction, not love. The point, however, is that romantic love usually begins with sexual attraction. Finding ourselves sexually attracted to someone, we spend time with that person. If we discover mutual interests, we may label our feelings “love.” Apparently, then, romantic love has two components. The first is emotional, a feeling of sexual attraction. The second is cognitive, a label that we attach to our feelings. If we attach this label, we describe ourselves as being “in love.”

**Marriage**

In the typical case, marriage in the United States is preceded by “love,” but, contrary to folklore, whatever love is, it certainly is not blind. That is, love does not hit us willy-nilly, as if Cupid had shot darts blindly into a crowd. If it did, marital patterns would be unpredictable. An examination of who marries whom, however, reveals that love is socially channeled.

**The Social Channels of Love and Marriage.** The most highly predictable social channels are age, education, social class, and race–ethnicity. For example, a Latina with a college degree whose parents are both physicians is likely to fall in love with and marry a Latino slightly older than herself who has graduated from college. Similarly, a girl who drops out of high school and whose parents are on welfare is likely to fall in love with and marry a man who comes from a background similar to hers.

Sociologists use the term **homogamy** to refer to the tendency of people who have similar characteristics to marry one another. Homogamy occurs largely as a result of propinquity, or spatial nearness. That is, we tend to “fall in love” with and marry people who live near us or whom we meet at school, church, or work. The people with whom we associate are far from a random sample of the population, for social filters produce neighborhoods, schools, and places of worship that follow racial–ethnic and social class lines.

As with all social patterns, there are exceptions. Although 93 percent of Americans who marry choose someone of their same racial–ethnic background, 7 percent do not. Because there are 60 million married couples in the United States, those 7 percent add up, totaling over 4 million couples (*Statistical Abstract* 2009: Table 59).

One of the more dramatic changes in U.S. marriage patterns is the increase in marriages between African Americans and whites. Today it is difficult to realize how norm-shattering such marriages used to be, but they used to be illegal in 40 states (Staples 2008). Mississippi had the most extreme penalty for interracial marriage: *life in prison* (Crossen 2004b). Despite the risks, a few couples crossed the “color line,” but it took the social upheaval of the 1960s to break this barrier permanently. In 1967, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the state laws that prohibited such marriages.

Figure 10.3 illustrates this change. Look at the race–ethnicity of the husbands and wives in these marriages, and you will see that here, too, Cupid’s arrows don’t hit random targets. Why do you think this particular pattern exists?

**Childbirth**

**Ideal Family Size.** The number of children that Americans consider ideal has changed over the years, with preferences moving to smaller families. Figure 10.4 shows this change, based on questions the Gallup organization has been asking since the 1930s. Religion shows an interesting divide, not between Protestants and Roman Catholics, who give the same
answers, but by church attendance. Those who attend services more often prefer larger families than those who attend less often. The last couple of polls have revealed a rather unexpected divide: Younger Americans (ages 18 to 34) prefer larger families than do those who are older than 34 (Gallup Poll, June 26, 2007).

**Marital Satisfaction.** Sociologists have found that after the birth of a child marital satisfaction usually decreases (Claxton and Perry-Jenkins 2008; Simon 2008). To
understand why, recall from Chapter 5 that a dyad (two persons) provides greater intimacy than a triad (after adding a third person, interaction must be shared). In addition, the birth of a child unbalances the roles that the couple have worked out (Knauth 2000). To move from the abstract to the concrete, think about the implications for marriage of coping with a fragile newborn’s 24-hour-a-day needs of being fed, soothed, and diapered—while having less sleep and greater expenses.

Yet husbands and wives continue to have children, not because they don’t know how to avoid conceiving them, but because having their own child brings them so much satisfaction. New parents bubble over with joy, saying things like, “There’s no feeling to compare with holding your own child in your arms. Those little hands, those tiny feet, those big eyes, that little nose, that sweet face . . .” and they gush on and on.

This is why there really is no equivalent to parents. It is their child, and no one else takes such delight in a baby’s first steps, its first word, and so on. Let’s turn, then, to child rearing.

**Child Rearing**

As you saw in Figure 10.2, today’s parents—both mothers and fathers—are spending more time with their children than parents did in the 1970s and 1980s. Despite this trend, with mothers and fathers spending so many hours away from home at work, we must ask: Who’s minding the kids while the parents are at work?

**Married Couples and Single Mothers.** Figure 10.5 on the next page compares the child care arrangements of married couples and single mothers. As you can see, their overall arrangements are similar. A main difference is the role of the child’s father while the mother is at work. For married couples, about one of five children is cared for by the father, while for single mothers, care by the father drops in half to one of ten. As you can see, grandparents and other relatives help fill the gap left by the absent father. Single mothers also rely more on organized day care.

**Day Care.** Figure 10.5 also shows that about one of four children is in day care. The broad conclusions of research on day care were reported in Chapter 3 (page 84). Apparently only a minority of U.S. day care centers offer high-quality care as measured by whether they provide safety, stimulating learning activities, and emotional warmth (Bergmann 1995; Blau 2000). A primary reason for this dismal situation is the low salaries paid to day care workers, who average only about $16,000 a year (“Child Day Care Services” 2009).

It is difficult for parents to judge the quality of day care, since they don’t know what takes place when they are not there. If you ever look for day care, two factors best predict that children will receive quality care: staff who have taken courses in early childhood development and a low ratio of children per staff member (Blau 2000; Belsky et al. 2007). If you have nagging fears that your children might be neglected or even abused, choose a center that streams live Web cam images on the Internet. While at work, you can “visit” each room of the day care center via cyberspace and monitor your toddler’s activities and care.

**Nannies.** For upper-middle-class parents, nannies have become a popular alternative to day care centers. Parents love the one-on-one care. They also like the convenience of in-home care, which eliminates the need to transport the child to an unfamiliar environment, reduces the chances that the child will catch illnesses, and eliminates the hardship of parents having to take time off from work when their child becomes ill. A recurring problem, however,
is tensions between the parents and the nanny: jealousy that the nanny might see the first step, hear the first word, or—worse yet—be called “mommy.” There are also tensions over different discipline styles; disdain on the part of the nanny that the mother isn’t staying home with her child; and feelings of guilt or envy as the child cries when the nanny leaves but not when the mother goes to work.

**Social Class.** Do you think that social class makes a difference in how people rear their children? If you answered “yes,” you are right. But what difference? And why? Sociologists have found that working-class parents tend to think of children as wildflowers that develop naturally. Middle-class parents, in contrast, are more likely to think of children as garden flowers that need a lot of nurturing if they are to bloom (Lareau 2002). These contrasting views make a world of difference. Working-class parents are more likely to set limits on their children and then let them choose their own activities, while middle-class parents are more likely to try to push their children into activities that they think will develop the children’s thinking and social skills.

Sociologist Melvin Kohn (1963, 1977; Kohn and Schooler 1969) also found that the type of work that parents do has an impact on how they rear their children. Because members of the working class are closely supervised on their jobs, where they are expected to follow explicit rules, their concern is less with their children’s motivation and more with their outward conformity. These parents are more apt to use physical punishment—which brings about outward conformity without regard for internal attitude. Middle-class workers, in contrast, are expected to take more initiative on the job. Consequently, middle-class parents have more concern that their children develop curiosity and self-expression. They are also more likely to withdraw privileges or affection than to use physical punishment.

**Family Transitions**

The later stages of family life bring their own pleasures to be savored and problems to be solved. Let’s look at two transitions—staying home longer and adjusting to widowhood.

**“Adultolescents” and the Not-So-Empty Nest.** When the last child leaves home, the husband and wife are left, as at the beginning of their marriage, “alone together.” This situation, sometimes called the empty nest—is not as empty as it used to be. With prolonged education and the high cost of establishing a household, U.S. children are leaving home later. Many stay home during college, and others move back after college. Some (called “boomerang children”) strike out on their own, but then find the cost or responsibility too great and return home. Much to their own disappointment, some even leave and return to the parents’ home several times. As a result, 42 percent of all U.S. 25- to 29-year-olds are living with their parents (U.S. Census Bureau 2007a:Table A2).

Although these “adultolescents” enjoy the protection of home, they have to work out issues of remaining dependent on their parents at the same time that they are grappling with concerns and fears about establishing independent lives. For the parents, “boomerang

![FIGURE 10.5 Who Takes Care of Preschoolers While Their Mothers Are at Work?](image)
children” mean not only a disruption of routines but also disagreements about turf, authority, and responsibilities—items they thought were long ago resolved.

**Widowhood.** As you know, women are more likely than men to become widowed. There are two reasons for this: On average, women live longer than men, and they usually marry men older than they are. For either women or men, the death of a spouse tears at the self, clawing at identities that had merged through the years. With the one who had become an essential part of the self gone, the survivor, as in adolescence, once again confronts the perplexing question “Who am I?”

The death of a spouse produces what is called the *widowhood effect*. The impact of the death is so strong that it increases the chances that the surviving spouse will die earlier than expected. The “widowhood effect” is not even across the board, however, and those who have gone through anticipatory grief suffer fewer health consequences (Elwert and Christakis 2008). This is apparently because they knew their spouse was going to die, and they were able to make preparations that smoothed the transition—from arranging finances to preparing themselves psychologically for being alone (Hiltz 1989). You can see how saying goodbye and cultivating treasured last memories would help people adjust to the impending death of an intimate companion. Sudden death, in contrast, rips the loved one away, offering no chance for this predeath healing.

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**Diversity in U.S. Families**

As we review some of the vast diversity of U.S. families, it is important to note that we are not comparing any of them to *the* American family. There is no such thing. Rather, family life varies widely throughout the United States. We have already seen in several contexts how significant social class is in our lives. Its significance will continue to be evident as we examine diversity in U.S. families.

**African American Families**

Note that the heading reads African American *families*, not *the* African American family. There is no such thing as *the* African American family any more than there is *the* white family or *the* Latino family. The primary distinction is not between African Americans and
other groups, but between social classes (Willie and Reddick 2003). Because African Americans who are members of the upper class follow the class interests reviewed in Chapter 7—preservation of privilege and family fortune—they are especially concerned about the family background of those whom their children marry (Gatewood 1990). To them, marriage is viewed as a merger of family lines. Children of this class marry later than children of other classes.

Middle-class African American families focus on achievement and respectability. Both husband and wife are likely to work outside the home. A central concern is that their children go to college, get good jobs, and marry well—that is, marry people like themselves, respectable and hardworking, who want to get ahead in school and pursue a successful career.

African American families in poverty face all the problems that cluster around poverty (Wilson 1987, 1996; Anderson 1990/2006; Venkatesh 2006). Because the men are likely to have few skills and to be unemployed, it is difficult for them to fulfill the cultural roles of husband and father. Consequently, these families are likely to be headed by a woman and to have a high rate of births to single women. Divorce and desertion are also more common than among other classes. Sharing scarce resources and “stretching kinship” are primary survival mechanisms. People who have helped out in hard times are considered brothers, sisters, or cousins to whom one owes obligations as though they were blood relatives; and men who are not the biological fathers of their children are given fatherhood status (Stack 1974; Hall 2008). Sociologists use the term fictive kin to refer to this stretching of kinship.

From Figure 10.6 you can see that, compared with other groups, African American families are the least likely to be headed by married couples and the most likely to be headed by women. Because African American women tend to go farther in school than African American men, they are more likely than women in other racial–ethnic groups to marry men who are less educated than themselves (Eshleman 2000; Harford 2008).

**FIGURE 10.6** Family Structure: U.S. Families with Children Under Age 18 Headed by Mothers, Fathers, and Both Parents

Sources: By the author. For Native Americans, “American Community . . .” 2004. For other groups, Statistical Abstract of the United States 2009:Table 68.
Latino Families

As Figure 10.6 shows, the proportion of Latino families headed by married couples and women falls in between that of whites and Native Americans. The effects of social class on families, which I just sketched, also apply to Latinos. In addition, families differ by country of origin. Families from Mexico, for example, are more likely to be headed by a married couple than are families from Puerto Rico (Statistical Abstract 2009:Table 38). The longer that Latinos have lived in the United States, the more their families resemble those of middle-class Americans (Saenz 2004).

With such wide variety, experts disagree on what is distinctive about Latino families. Some researchers have found that Latino husbands-fathers play a stronger role than husbands-fathers in white and African American families (Vega 1990; Torres et al. 2002). Others point to the Spanish language, the Roman Catholic religion, and a strong family orientation coupled with a disapproval of divorce, but there are Latino families who are Protestants, don’t speak Spanish, and so on. Still others emphasize loyalty to the extended family, with an obligation to support the extended family in times of need (Cauce and Domenech-Rodriguez 2002), but this, too, is hardly unique to Latino families. Descriptions of Latino families used to include machismo—an emphasis on male strength, sexual vigor, and dominance—but machismo decreases with each generation in the United States and is certainly not limited to Latinos (Hurtado et al. 1992; D. Wood 2001; Torres et al. 2002). Compared to their husbands, Latina wives-mothers tend to be more family-centered and display more warmth and affection for their children, but this is probably true of all racial–ethnic groups.

With such diversity among Latino families, you can see how difficult it is to draw generalizations. The sociological point that runs through all studies of Latino families, however, is this: Social class is more important in determining family life than is either being Latino or a family’s country of origin.

Asian American Families

As you can see from Figure 10.6 on the previous page, Asian American children are more likely than children in other racial–ethnic groups to grow up with both parents. As with the other groups, family life also reflects social class. In addition, because Asian Americans
emigrated from many different countries, their family life reflects those many cultures (Jeong and You 2008). As with Latino families, the more recent their immigration, the more closely their family life reflects the patterns in their country of origin (Glenn 1994; Jeong and You 2008).

Despite such differences, sociologist Bob Suzuki (1985), who studied Chinese American and Japanese American families, identified several distinctive characteristics of Asian American families. Although Asian Americans have adopted the nuclear family structure, they tend to retain Confucian values that provide a framework for family life: humanism, collectivity, self-discipline, hierarchy, respect for the elderly, moderation, and obligation. Obligation means that each member of a family owes respect to other family members and has a responsibility never to bring shame on the family. Conversely, a child's success brings honor to the family (Zamiska 2004). To control their children, Asian American parents are more likely to use shame and guilt than physical punishment.

Seldom does the ideal translate into the real, and so it is here. The children born to Asian immigrants confront a bewildering world of incompatible expectations—those of the new culture and those of their parents. As a result, they experience more family conflict and mental problems than do children of Asian Americans who are not immigrants (Meyers 2006; Ying and Han 2008).

Native American Families

Perhaps the single most significant issue that Native American families face is whether to follow traditional values or to assimilate into the dominant culture (Frosch 2008). This primary distinction creates vast differences among families. The traditionalists speak native languages and emphasize distinctive Native American values and beliefs. Those who have assimilated into the broader culture do not.

Figure 10.6 on page 315 depicts the structure of Native American families. You can see how close it is to that of Latinos. In general, Native American parents are permissive with their children and avoid physical punishment. Elders play a much more active role in their children’s families than they do in most U.S. families: Elders, especially grandparents, not only provide child care but also teach and discipline children. Like others, Native American families differ by social class.
In Sum: From this brief review, you can see that race–ethnicity signifies little for understanding family life. Rather, social class and culture hold the keys. The more resources a family has, the more it assumes the characteristics of a middle-class nuclear family. Compared with the poor, middle-class families have fewer children and fewer unmarried mothers. They also place greater emphasis on educational achievement and deferred gratification.

One-Parent Families

Another indication of how extensively U.S. families are changing is the increase in one-parent families. From Figure 10.7, you can see that the percentage of U.S. children who live with two parents (not necessarily their biological parents) has dropped sharply. The concerns—even alarm—that are often expressed about one-parent families may have more to do with their poverty than with children being reared by one parent. Because women head most one-parent families, these families tend to be poor. Although most divorced women earn less than their former husbands, about 85 percent of children of divorce live with their mothers (Aulette 2002).

To understand the typical one-parent family, then, we need to view it through the lens of poverty, for that is its primary source of strain. The results are serious, not just for these parents and their children but also for society. Children from one-parent families are more likely to have behavioral problems in school, to drop out of school, to get arrested, to have physical health problems, to have emotional problems, and to get divorced (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Menaghan et al. 1997; McLanahan and Schwartz 2002; Amato and Cheadle 2005; Wen 2008). If female, they are more likely to have sex at a younger age and to bear children while still unmarried teenagers.

Families Without Children

While most married women give birth, about one of five do not (Dye 2008). This is double what it was twenty years ago. As you can see from Figure 10.8, childlessness varies by racial–ethnic group, with whites and Latinas representing the extremes. Some couples are infertile, but most childless couples have made a choice to not have children—and they prefer the term childfree rather than childless. Some decide before marriage that they will never have children, often to attain a sense of freedom—to pursue a career, to be able to change jobs, to travel, and to have less stress (Letherby 2002; Koropeckyj-Cox 2007). In many cases, the couple has simply postponed the date they were going to have their first child until either it was too late to have children or it seemed too uncomfortable to add a child to their lifestyle.

With trends firmly in place—more education and careers for women, advances in contraception, legal abortion, the high cost of rearing children, and an emphasis on possessing more material things—the proportion of women who never bear children is likely to increase. Consider this statement in a newsletter:

We are DINKS (Dual Incomes, No Kids). We are happily married. I am 43; my wife is 42. We have been married for almost twenty years. . . . Our investment strategy has a lot to do with our personal philosophy: “You can have kids—or you can have everything else!”

Many couples who are not childless by choice desperately want to have children, and they keep trying to do so. Coming to the soul-wrenching conclusion that they can never bear children, many decide to adopt. Some, in contrast, turn to solutions not available to previous generations, the topic of our Sociology and the New Technology box on the next page.
Rent-a-Womb: “How Much for Your Uterus?”

Let’s suppose that you are a married woman—easier, of course, for some to suppose than others. Let’s also suppose that you’ve been trying to get pregnant for several years and that nothing has worked. You and your husband have tried the usual techniques: sex at a certain time of the month, lying on your back, legs up after sex, and so on. Nothing.

You’ve both been examined by doctors, probed and tested. Everything is fine. You’ve taken some fertility drugs. Nothing. You’ve even taken some “just in case” pills that your doctor prescribed. Still nothing.

OK, hard to admit, but you even did some of the superstitious things that your aunt told you to try. Still nothing.

Your gynecologist has told you about surrogacy, that for a fee a woman will rent her womb to you. A fertility expert will mix your egg and your husband’s sperm in a little dish and insert the fertilized egg inside a woman who will bear the child for you.

The cost? About $50,000 or so. It might as well be ten times as high. You can’t afford it anyway.

Then you hear about a clinic in India. For $15,000, including your plane ticket and hotel, you can get the whole procedure: your egg fertilized and transferred to a young Indian woman, the woman’s care including a balanced diet, the hospitalization, the doctor, the delivery, and the necessary papers filed. You even get to look over the young women who are offering their uteruses for rent and pick out one you like. She’ll become like part of your family. Or something like that.

Outsourcing pregnancy. What a creative use of capitalism.

No matter how you try, though, you can’t get the $15,000 together! Or maybe you have a fear of flying?

Or maybe you think that surrogacy in India is taking advantage of women in poverty?

So have you exhausted all alternatives? Not by a long shot. There are always friends and relatives.

OK, none of them is willing. But if no one else, maybe your own old mother can revitalize her womb once more!

Sound too far-fetched to be even a possibility?

Not at all. This is just what Kim Coseno asked her 56-year old mother to do. And her mother agreed. That’s their picture on this page. And, yes, Kim’s mother did a great job. She delivered triplets for Kim and her husband Joe.

And she didn’t charge anything either.

For Your Consideration

If you really wanted children and were not able to get pregnant (or it is your wife in this situation), would you consider surrogacy? Why or why not? Do you think that hiring a poor woman in India to be a surrogate mother for your child is exploitation? (The surrogate mothers are paid several thousand dollars, when the annual Indian wage is about $600.) What do you think about the birth of the triplets shown in the photo below?

Based on Spring 2006; Mukherjee 2007; Associated Press 2008.
**Blended Families**

The blended family, one whose members were once part of other families, is an increasingly significant type of family in the United States. Two divorced people who marry and each bring their children into a new family unit form a blended family. With divorce common, millions of children spend some of their childhood in blended families. I’ve never seen a better description of how blended families complicate family relationships than what one of my freshman students wrote:

I live with my dad. I should say that I live with my dad, my brother (whose mother and father are also my mother and father), my half sister (whose father is my dad, but whose mother is my father’s last wife), and two stepbrothers and stepsisters (children of my father’s current wife). My father’s wife (my current stepmother, not to be confused with his second wife who, I guess, is no longer my stepmother) is pregnant, and soon we all will have a new brother or sister. Or will it be a half brother or half sister?

If you can’t figure this out, I don’t blame you. I have trouble myself. It gets very complicated around Christmas. Should we all stay together? Split up and go to several other homes? Who do we buy gifts for, anyway?

**Gay and Lesbian Families**

Although a handful of U.S. states allow people of the same sex to marry, 40 states have laws that do not allow same-sex marriages (McKinley and Goostein 2008). Walking a fine conceptual tightrope, some states recognize “registered domestic partnerships,” giving legal status to same-sex unions but avoiding the term *marriage*. The result is that most gay and lesbian couples lack both legal marriage and the legal protection of registered “partnerships.”

Gay and lesbian couples live throughout the United States, but about half live in just twenty cities, with the greatest concentrations in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Atlanta, New York City, and Washington, D.C. About one-fifth of gay and lesbian couples were previously married to heterosexuals. Twenty-two percent of female couples and 5 percent of male couples have children from their earlier heterosexual marriages (Bianchi and Casper 2000).

What are same-sex relationships like? Like everything else in life, these couples cannot be painted with a single brush stroke. Social class, as it does for opposite-sex couples, significantly shapes orientations to life. Sociologists Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz (1985), who interviewed same-sex couples, found their main struggles to be housework, money, careers, problems with relatives, and sexual adjustment. If these sound familiar, they should be, as they are precisely the same problems that heterosexual couples face. Some find that their sexual orientation brings discrimination, which can add stress to their relationship (Todosijevic et al. 2005). The children they rear have about the same adjustment as children reared by heterosexual parents and are no more likely to have a gay or lesbian sexual orientation (Perrin 2002; “Lesbian and Gay Parenting” 2005). Same-sex couples are more likely to break up, and one argument for legalizing gay marriages is that this will make these relationships more stable. Where same-sex marriages are legal, like opposite-sex marriages, to break them requires negotiating around legal obstacles.
As is apparent from this discussion, marriage and family life in the United States is undergoing a fundamental shift. Let’s examine other indicators of this change.

**Postponing Marriage and Childbirth**

Figure 10.9 below illustrates one of the most significant changes in U.S. marriages. As you can see, the average age of first-time brides and grooms declined from 1890 to about 1950. In 1890, the typical first-time bride was 22, but by 1950, she had just left her teens. For about twenty years, there was little change. Then in 1970, the average age started to increase sharply. Today’s average first-time bride and groom are older than at any other time in U.S. history.

Since postponing marriage is today’s norm, it may come as a surprise to many readers to learn that most U.S. women used to be married by the time they reached age 24. To see this remarkable change, look at Figure 10.10 on the next page. Postponing marriage has become so common that the percentage of women of this age who are unmarried is now more than double what it was in 1970. Another consequence of postponing marriage is that the average age at which U.S. women have their first child is 25.2, also the highest in U.S. history (Mathews and Hamilton 2002; Martin et al. 2007).

Why have these changes occurred? The primary reason is cohabitation. Although Americans have postponed the age at which they first marry, they have not postponed the age at which they first set up housekeeping with someone of the opposite sex. Let’s look at this trend.

**Cohabitation**

Figure 10.11 on the next page shows the increase in cohabitation, adults living together in a sexual relationship without being married. This figure is one of the most remarkable in sociology. Hardly ever do we have totals that rise this steeply and consistently. Cohabitation is ten times more common today than it was in the 1970s. From a furtive activity, cohabitation has moved into the mainstream, and today most couples who marry have cohabited (Popenoe 2008). Cohabitation has become so common that about 40 percent of U.S. children will spend some time in a cohabiting family (Scommegna 2002).

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**FIGURE 10.9** When do Americans Marry? The Changing Age at First Marriage

![Graph showing the changing age at first marriage from 1890 to 2020 for both men and women.](image)

*Note:* This is the median age at first marriage. The broken lines indicate the author’s estimate.

*Source:* By the author. Based on U.S. Census Bureau 2008.
Commitment is the essential difference between cohabitation and marriage. In marriage, the assumption is permanence; in cohabitation, couples agree to remain together for “as long as it works out.” For marriage, individuals make public vows that legally bind them as a couple; for cohabitation, they simply move in together. Marriage requires a judge to authorize its termination; if a cohabiting relationship sours, the couple separates, telling friends and family that “it didn’t work out.” As you know, many cohabiting couples marry, but do you know how this is related to what cohabitation means to them? Let’s explore this in our Down-to-Earth Sociology box on the next page.

Are the marriages of couples who cohabited stronger than the marriages of couples who did not live together before they married? It would seem they would be, that cohabiting couples have had the chance to work out real-life problems prior to marriage. To find out, sociologists have compared their divorce rates. It turns out that couples who cohabit before marriage are more likely to divorce (Lichter and Qian 2008). Why? They had that living-together experience, and only then did they decide to marry. The reason, suggest some sociologists, is because cohabiting relationships are so easy to end (Dush et al. 2003). Because of this, people are less picky about choosing someone to live with (“It’s probably a temporary thing”) than choosing someone to marry (“This is really serious”). After couples cohabit, however, many experience a push toward marriage. Some of this “push” comes from simply having common possessions, pets, and children. Some comes from family and friends—from subtle hints to direct statements. As a result, many end up marrying a partner that they would not otherwise have chosen.

Grandparents as Parents

It is becoming more common for grandparents to rear their grandchildren. About 6 percent of U.S. children are being reared by their grandparents, twice the percentage of a generation ago (Lagnado 2009). The main reason for these skipped-generation families is that the parents are incapable of caring for their children. Some of the parents have died, but the most common reasons are that the parents are ill, homeless, addicted to drugs, or in prison. In other instances, the grandparents stepped in when the parents neglected or abused their children.

Caring for grandchildren can bring great satisfaction. The grandparents know that their grandchildren are in loving hands, they build strong emotional bonds with
them, and they are able to transmit their family values. But taking over as parents also brings stress: the unexpected responsibilities of parenthood, the squeezed finances, the need to continue working when they were anticipating retirement, conflict with the parents of the children, and feeling trapped (Waldrop and Weber 2001; Lumpkin 2008). This added wear and tear takes its toll, and these grandparents are more likely than others to be depressed (Letiecq et al. 2008).

### TABLE 10.2 What Cohabitation Means: Does It Make a Difference?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What Cohabitation Means</th>
<th>Percent of Couples</th>
<th>Split Up</th>
<th>Still Together</th>
<th>Of Those Still Together</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substitute for Marriage</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step toward Marriage</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trial Marriage</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coresidential Dating</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The “Sandwich Generation” and Elder Care

The “sandwich generation” refers to people who find themselves sandwiched between and responsible for two other generations, their children and their own aging parents. Typically between the ages of 40 and 55, these people find themselves pulled in two different directions. Many feel overwhelmed as these competing responsibilities collide. Some are plagued with guilt and anger because they can be in only one place at a time and have little time to pursue personal interests.

Concerns about elder care have gained the attention of the corporate world, and half of the 1,000 largest U.S. companies offer elder care assistance to their employees (Hewitt Associates 2004). This assistance includes seminars, referral services, and flexible work schedules to help employees meet their responsibilities without missing so much work. Why are companies responding more positively to the issue of elder care than to child care? Most CEOs are older men whose wives stayed home to take care of their children, so they don’t understand the stresses of balancing work and child care. In contrast, nearly all have aging parents, and many have faced the turmoil of trying to cope with both their parents’ needs and those of work and their own family.

With people living longer, this issue is likely to become increasingly urgent.

Divorce and Remarriage

The topic of family life would not be complete without considering divorce. Let’s first try to determine how much divorce there really is.

Ways of Measuring Divorce

You probably have heard that the U.S. divorce rate is 50 percent, a figure that is popular with reporters. The statistic is true in the sense that each year almost half as many divorces are granted as there are marriages performed. The totals are 2.16 million marriages and about 1.04 million divorces (Statistical Abstract 2009:Table 123).

What is wrong, then, with saying that the divorce rate is about 50 percent? Think about it for a moment. Why should we compare the number of divorces and marriages that take place during the same year? The couples who divorced do not—with rare exceptions—come from the group that married that year. The one number has nothing to do with the other, so these statistics in no way establish the divorce rate.

What figures should we compare, then? Couples who divorce come from the entire group of married people in the country. Since the United States has 60,000,000 married couples, and a little over 1 million of them get divorced in a year, the divorce rate for any given year is less than 2 percent. A couple’s chances of still being married at the end of a year are over 98 percent—not bad odds—and certainly much better odds than the mass media would have us believe. As the Social Map on the next page shows, the “odds”—if we want to call them that—depend on where you live.

Over time, of course, each year’s small percentage adds up. A third way of measuring divorce, then, is to ask, “Of all U.S. adults, what percentage are divorced?” Figure 10.13 on the next page answers this question. You can see how divorce has increased over the years and how race—ethnicity makes a difference for the likelihood that couples will divorce. If you look closely, you can also see that the rate of divorce has slowed down.

Figure 10.13 shows us the percentage of Americans who are currently divorced, but we get yet another answer if we ask the question, “What percentage of Americans have ever been divorced?” This percentage increases with each age group, peaking when people reach their 50s. Forty percent of women in their 50s have been divorced at some point in their
lives; for men, the total is 43 percent ("Marital History . . ." 2004). Looked at in this way, a divorce rate of 50 percent, then, is fairly accurate.

What most of us want to know is what our chances of divorce are. It is one thing to know that a certain percentage of Americans are divorced, but have sociologists found out anything that will tell me about my chances of divorce? This is the topic of the Down-to-Earth Sociology box on the next page.

**FIGURE 10.12** The “Where” of U.S. Divorce

![Map of U.S. Divorce Rates](image)

*Note:* Data for California, Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, and Louisiana, based on the earlier editions in the source, have been decreased by the average decrease in U.S. divorce.

*Source:* By the author. Based on *Statistical Abstract of the United States* 1995:Table 149; 2002:Table 111; 2009:Table 123.

**FIGURE 10.13** What Percentage of Americans Are Divorced?

![Graph of Divorce Rates by Ethnicity](image)

*Note:* This figure shows the percentage who are divorced and have not remarried, not the percentage who have ever divorced. Only these racial–ethnic groups are listed in the source. The source only recently added data on Asian Americans. *Author’s estimate

*Source:* By the author. Based on *Statistical Abstract of the United States* 1995:Table 58; 2009:Table 56.
Children of Divorce

Each year, more than 1 million U.S. children learn that their parents are divorcing. Numbers like this are cold. They don’t tell us what divorce feels like, what the children experience. In the Down-to-Earth Sociology box on the next page, we try to catch a glimpse of this.

Children whose parents divorce are more likely than children reared by both parents to experience emotional problems, both during childhood and after they grow up (Amato and...
The custody and support of children are often a major source of contention in divorces. Shown here is Britney Spears, whose battle for the custody of her children and her court-ordered support of her former husband, Kevin Federline, made news around the world.

The statistics can tell you how many couples divorce, how many children these couples have, and other interesting information. But the numbers can’t tell what divorce is like—how children feel their world falling apart when they learn their parents are going to get a divorce. Or how torn apart they feel when they are shuffled from one house to another.

Elizabeth Marquardt, a child of divorce herself, did a national study of children of divorce. In her book, *Between Two Worlds* (2005), she weaves her own experiences with those of the people she interviewed, taking us into the thought world of children who are being pulled apart by their parents.

It’s the many little things that the statistics don’t touch. The children feel like they are growing up in two families, not one. This creates painful complications that make the children feel like insiders and outsiders in their parents’ worlds. They are outsiders when they look or act like one of the parents. This used to be a mark of an insider, a part of the family to which the child and the two parents belonged. But now it reminds one parent of the former spouse, someone they want to forget. And those children who end up with different last names instead of one of their parents—what a dramatic symbol of outsider that is. And when children learn something about one parent that they can’t tell the other parent—which happens often—how uncomfortable they feel at being unable to share this information. Outsider–insider again.

What information do you share, anyway—or what do you not dare to share—as you travel from one world to the other? What do you say when dad asks if mom has a boyfriend? Is this supposed to be a secret? Will dad get mad if you tell him? Will he feel hurt? You don’t want him to get angry or to feel hurt. Yet you don’t want to keep secrets. And will mom get mad if you tell dad? It’s all so complicated for a kid.

Marquardt says that as a child of divorce she tried to keep her two worlds apart, but they sometimes collided. At her mom’s house, she could say that things were “screwed up.” But if she used “screwed up” at her dad’s house, he would correct her, saying, “Messed up.” He meant the best for her, teaching her better language, but this left her feeling silly and ashamed. Things like this, little to most people, are significant to kids who feel pinched between their parents’ differing values, beliefs, and life styles.

To shuttle between two homes is to enter and leave different worlds—feeling things in common with each, but also sensing distances from each. And then come the strange relationships—their parents’ girlfriends or boyfriends. Eventually come new blended families, which may not blend so easily, those that bring the new stepmom or stepdad, and perhaps their children. And then there are the new break-ups, with a recurring cycle of supposedly permanent relationships. What a complicated world for a child to traverse.

Marquardt pinpoints the dilemma for the child of divorce when she says, Being with one parent always means not being with the other.

**For Your Consideration**

If you are a child of divorce, did you have two worlds of experience? Were your experiences like those mentioned here? If you lived with both parents, how do you think your life has been different because your parents didn’t divorce?

Sobolewski 2001; Weitoft et al. 2003). They are also more likely to become juvenile delinquents (Wallerstein et al. 2001) and less likely to complete high school, to attend college, and to graduate from college (McLanahan and Schwartz 2002). Finally, the children of divorce are themselves more likely to divorce (Wolfinger 2003), perpetuating a marriage–divorce cycle.

Is the greater maladjustment of the children of divorce a serious problem? This question initiated a lively debate between two researchers, both psychologists. Judith Wallerstein...
claims that divorce scars children, making them depressed and leaving them with insecurities that follow them into adulthood (Wallerstein et al. 2001). Mavis Hetherington replies that 75 to 80 percent of children of divorce function as well as children who are reared by both of their parents (Hetherington and Kelly 2003).

Without meaning to weigh in on either side of this debate, it doesn't seem to be a simple case of the glass being half empty or half full. If 75 to 80 percent of children of divorce don't suffer long-term harm, this leaves one-fourth to one-fifth who do. Any way you look at it, one-fourth or one-fifth of a million children each year is a lot of kids who are having a lot of problems.

What helps children adjust to divorce? Children of divorce who feel close to both parents make the best adjustment, and those who don't feel close to either parent make the worst adjustment (Richardson and McCabe 2001). Other studies show that children adjust well if they experience little conflict, feel loved, live with a parent who is making a good adjustment, and have consistent routines. It also helps if their family has adequate money to meet its needs. Children also adjust better if a second adult can be counted on for support (Hayashi and Strickland 1998). Urie Bronfenbrenner (1992) says this person is like the third leg of a stool, giving stability to the smaller family unit. Any adult can be the third leg, he says—a relative, friend, or even a former mother-in-law—but the most powerful stabilizing third leg is the father, the ex-husband.

As mentioned, when the children of divorce grow up and marry, they are more likely to divorce than are adults who grew up in intact families. Have researchers found any factors that increase the chances that the children of divorce will have successful marriages? Actually, they have. They are more likely to have a lasting marriage if they marry someone whose parents did not divorce. These marriages have more trust and less conflict. If both husband and wife come from broken families, however, it is not good news. Those marriages tend to have less trust and more conflict, leading to a higher chance of divorce (Wolfinger 2003).

Grandchildren of Divorce

Paul Amato and Jacob Cheadle (2005), the first sociologists to study the grandchildren of people who had divorced, found that the effects of divorce continue across generations. Using a national sample, they compared grandchildren—those whose grandparents had divorced with those whose grandparents had not divorced. Their findings are astounding. The grandchildren of divorce have weaker ties to their parents, don't go as far in school, and are more likely to divorce than are adults who grew up in intact families. Have researchers found any factors that increase the chances that the children of divorce will have successful marriages? Actually, they have. They are more likely to have a lasting marriage if they marry someone whose parents did not divorce. These marriages have more trust and less conflict. If both husband and wife come from broken families, however, it is not good news. Those marriages tend to have less trust and more conflict, leading to a higher chance of divorce (Wolfinger 2003).
and don’t get along as well with their spouses. As these researchers put it, when parents divorce, the consequences ripple through the lives of children who are not yet born.

The Absent Father and Serial Fatherhood

With divorce common and mothers usually granted custody of the children, a new fathering pattern has emerged. In this pattern, known as serial fatherhood, a divorced father maintains high contact with his children during the first year or two after the divorce. As the man develops a relationship with another woman, he begins to play a fathering role with the woman’s children and reduces contact with his own children. With another breakup, this pattern may repeat. Relationships are so broken that 31 percent of children who live apart from their fathers have contact with their father less than once a month—and this includes phone calls. Another 30 percent have no contact with their father (Stewart 2003). For many men, fatherhood has apparently become a short-term commitment.

The Ex-Spouses

Anger, depression, and anxiety are common feelings at divorce. But so is relief. Women are more likely than men to feel that divorce is giving them a “new chance” in life. A few couples manage to remain friends through it all—but they are the exception. The spouse who initiates the divorce usually gets over it sooner (Kelly 1992; Wang and Amato 2000) and remarries sooner (Sweeney 2002).

Divorce does not necessarily mean the end of a couple’s relationship. Many divorced couples maintain contact because of their children (Fischer et al. 2005). For others, the “continuities,” as sociologists call them, represent lingering attachments (Vaughan 1985; Masheter 1991; author’s file 2005). The former husband may help his former wife paint a room or move furniture; she may invite him over for a meal or to watch television. They might even go to dinner or to see a movie together. Some couples even continue to make love after their divorce.

We don’t yet know the financial impact of divorce. Studies used to show that divorce lowered women’s income by a third (Seltzer 1994), but current research indicates that the finances of the average woman with minor children are either unchanged or actually improve after divorce (Bedard and Deschenes 2005; Ananat and Michaels 2007). There seem to be three reasons: divorced women work more hours, some move in with their parents, and others marry or cohabit with men who do better financially than their husbands did. We need more research to resolve this question.

Remarriage

Despite the number of people who emerge from divorce court swearing “Never again!” many do remarry. The rate at which they remarry, however, has slowed, and today only half of women who divorce remarry (Bramlett and Mosher 2002). Figure 10.14 shows how significant race–ethnicity is in determining whether women remarry. Comparable data are not available for men.

As Figure 10.15 shows, most divorced people marry other divorced people. You may be surprised that the women who are most likely to remarry are young mothers and those with less education (Glick and Lin 1986; Schmiege et al. 2001). Apparently women who are more educated and more independent (no children) can afford to be more selective. Men are more likely than women to remarry, perhaps because they have a larger pool of potential mates.

How do remarriages work out? The divorce rate of remarried people without children is the same as that of first marriages. Those who bring children into a new marriage, however, are more likely to divorce again (MacDonald and DeMaris 1995). Certainly these relationships are more complicated and stressful. A lack of clear norms to follow may also play a role (Coleman et al. 2000). As sociologist Andrew Cherlin (1989) noted, we lack satisfactory names for stepmothers, stepfathers, stepbrothers, stepsisters, stepaunts, stepuncles, stepcousins, and stepgrandparents. At the very least, these are awkward terms to use, but they also represent ill-defined relationships.
Two Sides of Family Life

Let’s first look at situations in which marriage and family have gone seriously wrong and then try to answer the question of what makes marriage work.

The Dark Side of Family Life: Battering, Child Abuse, Marital Rape, and Incest

The dark side of family life involves events that people would rather keep in the dark. We shall look at spouse battering, child abuse, rape, and incest.

Spouse Battering. To study spouse abuse, some sociologists have studied just a few victims in depth (Goetting 2001), while others have interviewed nationally representative samples of U.S. couples (Straus and Gelles 1988; Straus 1992). Although not all sociologists agree (Dobash et al. 1992, 1993; Pagelow 1992), Murray Straus concludes that husbands and wives are about equally likely to attack one another. If gender equality exists here, however, it certainly vanishes when it comes to the effects of violence—85 percent of the injured are women (Rennison 2003). A good part of the reason, of course, is that most husbands are bigger and stronger than their wives, putting women at a physical disadvantage in this literal battle of the sexes. The Down-to-Earth Sociology box on the next page discusses why some women remain with their abusive husbands.

Violence against women is related to the sexist structure of society, which we reviewed in Chapter 8, and to the socialization that we analyzed in Chapter 3. Because they grew up with norms that encourage aggression and the use of violence, some men feel that it is their right to control women. When frustrated in a relationship—or even by events outside it—some men become violent. The basic sociological question is how to socialize males to handle frustration and disagreements without resorting to violence (Rieker et al. 1997). We do not yet have this answer.

Child Abuse.

I answered an ad about a lakeside house in a middle-class neighborhood that was for sale by owner. As the woman showed me through her immaculate house, I was surprised to see a plywood box in the youngest child’s bedroom. About 3 feet high, 3 feet wide, and 6 feet long, the box was perforated with holes and had a little door with a padlock. Curious, I asked what it was. The woman replied matter-of-factly that her son had a behavior problem, and this was where they locked him for “time out.” She added that other times they would tie him to a float, attach a line to the dock, and put him in the lake.

I left as soon as I could. With thoughts of a terrorized child filling my head, I called the state child abuse hotline.

As you can tell, what I saw upset me. Most of us are bothered by child abuse—helpless children being victimized by their parents and other adults who are supposed to love, protect, and nurture them. The most gruesome of these cases make the evening news: The 4-year-old girl who was beaten and raped by her mother’s boyfriend, passed into a coma, and three days later passed out of this life; the 6- to 10-year-old children whose stepfather videotaped them engaging in sex acts. Unlike these cases, which made headlines in my area, most child abuse is never brought to our attention: the children who live in filth, who are neglected—left alone for hours or even days at a time—or who are beaten with extension cords—cases like the little boy I learned about when I went house hunting.

Child abuse is extensive. Each year, U.S. authorities receive about 2 million reports of children being abused or neglected. About 900,000 of these cases are substantiated (Statistical Abstract 2009:Table 330). The excuses that parents make are incredible. Of those I have read, the most fantastic is what a mother said to a Manhattan judge, “I slipped
Marital or Intimacy Rape. Sociologists have found that marital rape is more common than is usually supposed. For example, between one-third and one-half of women who seek help at shelters for battered women are victims of marital rape (Bergen 1996). Women at shelters, however, are not representative of U.S. women. To get a better answer of how common marital rape is, sociologist Diana Russell (1990) used a sampling
technique that allows generalization, but only to San Francisco. She found that 14 percent of married women report that their husbands have raped them. Similarly, 10 percent of a representative sample of Boston women interviewed by sociologists David Finkelhor and Kersti Yllo (1985, 1989) reported that their husbands had used physical force to compel them to have sex. Compared with victims of rape by strangers or acquaintances, victims of marital rape are less likely to report the rape (Mahoney 1999).

With the huge numbers of couples who are cohabiting, we need a term that includes sexual assault in these relationships. Perhaps, then, we should use the term intimacy rape. And intimacy rape is not limited to men who sexually assault women. Sociologist Lori Girshick (2002) interviewed lesbians who had been sexually assaulted by their partners. In these cases, both the victim and the offender were women. Girshick points out that if the pronoun “he” were substituted for “she” in her interviews, a reader would believe that the events were being told by women who had been battered and raped by their husbands. Like wives who have been raped by their husbands, these victims, too, suffered from shock, depression, and self-blame.

Incest. Sexual relations between certain relatives (for example, between brothers and sisters or between parents and children) constitute incest. Incest is most likely to occur in families that are socially isolated (Smith 1992). Sociologist Diana Russell (n.d.) found that incest victims who experience the greatest trauma are those who were victimized the most often, whose assaults occurred over longer periods of time, and whose incest was “more intrusive”—for example, sexual intercourse as opposed to sexual touching.

Who are the offenders? The most common incest is apparently between brothers and sisters, with the sex initiated by the brother (Canavan et al. 1992; Carlson et al. 2006). With no random samples, however, we don’t know for sure. Russell found that uncles are the most common offenders, followed by first cousins, stepfathers, brothers, and, finally, other relatives ranging from brothers-in-law to stepgrandfathers. All studies indicate that incest between mothers and their children is rare, more so than between fathers and their children.

The Bright Side of Family Life: Successful Marriages

Successful Marriages. After examining divorce and family abuse, one could easily conclude that marriages seldom work out. This would be far from the truth, however, for about three of every five married Americans report that they are “very happy” with their marriages (Whitehead and Popenoe 2004). (Keep in mind that each year divorce eliminates about a million unhappy marriages.) To find out what makes marriage successful, sociologists Jeanette and Robert Lauer (1992) interviewed 351 couples who had been married fifteen years or longer. Fifty-one of these marriages were unhappy, but the couples stayed together for religious reasons, because of family tradition, or “for the sake of the children.”

Of the others, the 300 happy couples, all

1. Think of their spouse as their best friend
2. Like their spouse as a person
3. Think of marriage as a long-term commitment
4. Believe that marriage is sacred
5. Agree with their spouse on aims and goals
6. Believe that their spouse has grown more interesting over the years
7. Strongly want the relationship to succeed
8. Laugh together

Sociologist Nicholas Stinnett (1992) used interviews and questionnaires to study 660 families from all regions of the United States and parts of South America. He found that happy families
1. Spend a lot of time together
2. Are quick to express appreciation
3. Are committed to promoting one another’s welfare
4. Do a lot of talking and listening to one another
5. Are religious
6. Deal with crises in a positive manner

There are three more important factors: Marriages are happier when the partners get along with their in-laws (Bryant et al. 2001), find leisure activities that they both enjoy (Crawford et al. 2002), and agree on how to spend money (Bernard 2008).

Symbolic Interactionism and the Misuse of Statistics

Many students express concerns about their own marital future, a wariness born out of the divorce of their parents, friends, neighbors, relatives—even their pastors and rabbis. They wonder about their chances of having a successful marriage. Because sociology is not just about abstract ideas, but is really about our lives, it is important to stress that you are an individual, not a statistic. That is, if the divorce rate were 33 percent or 50 percent, this would not mean that if you marry, your chances of getting divorced are 33 percent or 50 percent. That is a misuse of statistics—and a common one at that. Divorce statistics represent all marriages and have absolutely nothing to do with any individual marriage. Our own chances depend on our own situations—especially the way we approach marriage.

To make this point clearer, let’s apply symbolic interactionism. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, we create our own worlds. That is, because our experiences don’t come with built-in meanings, we interpret our experiences and act accordingly. As we do so, we can create a self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, if we think that our marriage might fail, we are more likely to run when things become difficult. If we think that our marriage is going to work out, we are more likely to stick around and to do things to make the marriage successful. The folk saying “There are no guarantees in life” is certainly true, but it does help to have a vision that a good marriage is possible and that it is worth the effort to achieve.

The Future of Marriage and Family

What can we expect of marriage and family in the future? Despite its many problems, marriage is in no danger of becoming a relic of the past. Marriage is so functional that it exists in every society. Consequently, the vast majority of Americans will continue to find marriage vital to their welfare.

Certain trends are firmly in place. Cohabitation, births to single women, age at first marriage, and parenting by grandparents will increase. As more married women join the workforce, wives will continue to gain marital power. The number of elderly will increase, and more couples will find themselves sandwiched between caring for their parents and rearing their own children.

Our culture will continue to be haunted by distorted images of marriage and family: the bleak ones portrayed in the mass media and the rosy ones perpetuated by cultural myths. Sociological research can help to correct these distortions and allow us to see how our own family experiences fit into the patterns of our culture. Sociological research can also help to answer the big question: How do we formulate social policies that will support and enhance family life?
SUMMARY and REVIEW

Marriage and Family in Global Perspective
What is a family—and what themes are universal?
Family is difficult to define. There are exceptions to every element that one might consider essential. Consequently, family is defined broadly—as people who consider themselves related by blood, marriage, or adoption. Universally, marriage and family are mechanisms for governing mate selection, reckoning descent, and establishing inheritance and authority. Pp. 302–304.

Marriage and Family in Theoretical Perspective
What is a functionalist perspective on marriage and family?
Functionalists examine the functions and dysfunctions of family life. Examples include the incest taboo and how weakened family functions increase divorce. Pp. 304–306.

What is a conflict perspective on marriage and family?
Conflict theorists focus on inequality in marriage, especially unequal power between husbands and wives. P. 306.

What is a symbolic interactionist perspective on marriage and family?
Symbolic interactionists examine the contrasting experiences and perspectives of men and women in marriage. They stress that only by grasping the perspectives of wives and husbands can we understand their behavior. Pp. 306–308.

The Family Life Cycle
What are the major elements of the family life cycle?
The major elements are love and courtship, marriage, childbirth, child rearing, and the family in later life. Most mate selection follows predictable patterns of age, social

**Summary and Review**

**THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT Chapter 10**

1. Functionalists stress that the family is universal because it provides basic functions for individuals and society. What functions does your family provide? Hint: In addition to the section “The Functionalist Perspective,” also consider the section “Common Cultural Themes.”

2. Explain why social class is more important than race–ethnicity in determining a family’s characteristics.

3. Apply this chapter’s contents to your own experience with marriage and family. What social factors affect your family life? In what ways is your family life different from that of your grandparents when they were your age?

**Diversity in U.S. Families**

*How significant is race–ethnicity in family life?*

The primary distinction is social class, not race–ethnicity. Families of the same social class are likely to be similar, regardless of their race–ethnicity. Pp. 314–318.

*What other diversity do we see in U.S. families?*

Also discussed are one-parent, childless, blended, and gay and lesbian families. Each has its unique characteristics, but social class is significant in determining their primary characteristics. Poverty is especially significant for single-parent families, most of which are headed by women. Pp. 318–320.

**Trends in U.S. Families**

*What major changes characterize U.S. families?*

Three changes are postponement of first marriage, an increase in cohabitation, and more grandparents serving as parents to their grandchildren. With more people living longer, many middle-aged couples find themselves sandwiched between rearing their children and taking care of their aging parents. Pp. 320–324.

**Divorce and Remarriage**

*What is the current divorce rate?*

Depending on what numbers you choose to compare, you can produce almost any rate you wish, from 50 percent to less than 2 percent. Pp. 324–325.

*How do children and their parents adjust to divorce?*

Divorce is difficult for children, whose adjustment problems often continue into adulthood. Most divorced fathers do not maintain ongoing relationships with their children. Financial problems are usually greater for the former wives. The rate of remarriage has slowed. Pp. 325–328.

**Two Sides of Family Life**

*What are the two sides of family life?*

The dark side is abuse—spouse battering, child abuse, marital rape, and incest. All these are acts that revolve around the misuse of family power. The bright side is that most people find marriage and family to be rewarding. Pp. 330–333.

**The Future of Marriage and Family**

*What is the likely future of marriage and family?*

We can expect cohabitation, births to unmarried women, age at first marriage, and parenting by grandparents to increase. The growing numbers of women in the workforce are likely to continue to shift the balance of marital power. P. 333.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

**What can you find in MySocLab?**

- Complete Ebook
- Practice Tests and Video and Audio activities
- Mapping and Data Analysis exercises

**Where Can I Read More on This Topic?**

Suggested readings for this chapter are listed at the back of this book.