graduate Ellen Gulden, the central character in the film *One True Thing*, is on the brink of an exciting new writing career at *New York* magazine. Set to cause a stir with an investigative article about a politician tainted by scandal, Ellen’s future as a reporter looks promising. However, when she returns to her hometown for the weekend to celebrate her father’s birthday, Ellen receives some bad news. Her mother, Kate, is about to undergo surgery for cancer. The surgery will be grueling, and Kate will need a lot of help during her recovery. Ellen’s father, George, makes it clear that he expects Ellen to move back home to look after her mother. Horrified at the thought of jeopardizing her career, Ellen argues that the family should hire a housekeeper or that George should take a sabbatical from his job as an English professor and look after Kate himself. After a heated discussion, Ellen reluctantly agrees to come home.

Back in her childhood home, Ellen begins helping her mother with the domestic chores, while her father carries on with his life as usual. Ellen starts to realize that, growing up, she idealized her father and dismissed her mother’s lifestyle as frivolous. Kate is very involved with community activities, enjoys making curtains and taking care of the house, and comforts friends when they are in need. Looking at her parents through an adult’s eyes, Ellen begins to see them differently. She realizes that her mother is the glue holding the family together and that her father is a philanderer who does very little to help out around the house. When he invites two work colleagues to a private family Thanksgiving dinner—likely the last Thanksgiving the family will spend together—Ellen loses all patience with him. After a bitter confrontation, her father tells her to go back to her life in New York. However, before the situation is resolved, Kate takes a turn for the worse, and the family discovers that her cancer is terminal.

Anxious to resolve the situation between her husband and daughter, Kate calls Ellen into a room to talk. She explains that marriage is full of highs and lows, that she knows everything about her husband, and that removing him from her life would only have left a huge hole. She emphasizes the importance of family and tries to help Ellen see the situation from her point of view. Ellen eventually comes to realize that her parents love each other in their own way and that her father is suffering from her mother’s impending death just as much as the rest of the family.

At the end of the film, Kate gets increasingly weaker and begs Ellen to help her end her life. Ellen cannot and when her mother eventually dies of a morphine overdose, Ellen suspects that her father was responsible. She goes to plant flowers on her mother’s grave and runs into her father, who denies that he had anything to do with her mother’s death. They realize that Kate took the overdose by herself. George reiterates how much he loved his wife, his “one true thing,” and Ellen begins to forgive him for his fallibility.
What does *One True Thing* teach us about family relationships? The film explores the complex bonds that exist between husband and wife and between parent and child, and how these bonds change and develop over time.

At the beginning of the film, Ellen is in danger of becoming just like her father—cold and career-driven—but she gradually comes to see the important role that Kate plays in keeping the family together. It takes an honest and frank discussion with her mother for Ellen to truly understand her parents’ relationship, suggesting the importance of communication between individuals in a family and between different generations in particular. The film also considers how stressors such as illness can put added pressure on strained family relationships, as well as emphasizing the difficulty of balancing work life and home life—relatable issues for the majority of families in today’s society.

One day, when I was four years old, while I was riding my bicycle down a hill, the chain came off my bike. I couldn’t stop the bike or steer it to safety, and I crashed into a 1966 red Ford Mustang convertible that was being lovingly washed by its owner. The car was a wreck, the owner was furious, and I ended up in the hospital with several stitches in my elbow.

We can compare the bicycle to the family in society. When all the interrelated parts of the bicycle are working well together, the bike operates in an orderly way. Similarly, when all the different parts of society perform their designated functions, society is balanced and in harmony.

Throughout this chapter, we will examine the various definitions of marriage and family, look at historical and current trends in American families, and consider the role of families in society. We will also take a look at different theoretical perspectives of family and finally ask ourselves, “What is the meaning of family?”

### Introduction to Marriage and Family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>marriage</strong> – a legally recognized union between a man and a woman</th>
<th><strong>family</strong> – a group of two or more people related by birth, marriage, or adoption who live together</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>economic security – financial security and stability</td>
<td>protection – physical protection of all family members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social prestige and status – a sense of place and belonging</td>
<td>religious tradition – providing family members with a religious identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>education and socialization – raising and educating children according to cultural norms and values</td>
<td>recreation – family members entertain each other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>affection – family members provide intimacy and comfort</td>
<td>economic security – financial security and stability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**STRESSOR** is a situation or event causing stress.

Sometimes, family relationships are more complex than they initially appear. What defines a “normal” family?
Defining Marriage and Family

“Family: A social unit where the father is concerned with parking space, the children with outer space, and the mother with closet space.” — Evan Esar (1899–1995)

Take a moment to consider the definition of a family. What images spring to mind? If you are picturing a husband, wife, and two smiling children, you are envisioning a traditional or nuclear family—a family unit consisting of two parents and their children. A nuclear family does not include extended family members such as aunts, uncles, and grandparents. But only about 25 percent of families in the United States today fit this model. Many students reading this book likely come from single-parent families, same-sex families, or families that include stepparents and stepsiblings. Some may have been raised by their grandparents or by other relatives, and a quick poll would probably confirm that readers come from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. An accurate definition of marriages and families must take all of these different forms of marriages and families into account.

WHAT IS MARRIAGE?

In 1866, Britain’s House of Lords stated that marriage is the “voluntary union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others.” This definition has survived in legal doctrine, and marriage in the United States is typically defined as a legally recognized union between a man and a woman who are at or above a specified age and who are not legally married to someone else. The union is assumed to be permanent, although the joined parties can legally separate or have the union dissolved through divorce. Although widely accepted by many people, this definition of marriage is extremely narrow, excluding cohabiting couples in committed heterosexual or homosexual relationships that function in the same way as legal marriages, but without the same legal rights and protections. A broader definition of marriage might take these relationships into account and describe marriage as a union between two people in a committed relationship, in which they are united sexually, cooperate economically, and may give birth to, adopt, or rear children. However, even this description is culturally specific and does not accurately depict many marriages in non-Western cultures.

Types of Marriage

Marriages around the world are either monogamous or polygamous. In Western cultures, marriages are assumed to be monogamous—one person is married to another person and the relationship remains exclusive. In some parts of the world, polygamous marriages are the accepted form, in which one person is married to multiple husbands or wives. Polygamy is legally practiced in many parts of the world, including the Middle East, South America, Asia, and some parts of Africa. As we will see in Chapter 9, polygamy is illegal in the United States, although it is still practiced in some states.

Among non-Western cultures, rules about marriage vary greatly from those in Western society. In some parts of India, Africa, and Asia, children as young as six years old may marry other children (and sometimes adults), although they may not live together until they are older. Many cultures organize arranged marriages, in which the families of the bride and groom negotiate an arrangement before the two parties enter into a relationship.
Arranged marriages are common in some parts of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. However, changing attitudes toward gender roles and the influence of Western culture may be affecting traditional ideas about marriage in these countries. A recent report indicated that divorce rates in India are soaring among the middle classes as working women of independent means refuse to submit to arranged marriages. Although there are many cultural variations of marriage, family historian Stephanie Coontz notes that all arrangements defined as marriages share three common characteristics: They establish rights and obligations related to gender, sexuality, extended family relationships, and legitimacy of children; they establish specific roles within the wider community; and they allow the organized transfer of wealth and property from one generation to the next.3

Although traditional families still make up the largest percentage of family groups in the United States, many families today consist of unmarried couples or single-parent households.

Although useful for analytical purposes, limiting the definition of family to include only relatives within the same household makes it...
difficult for sociologists to fully examine the patterns of support and caregiving that take place across households. Many people have close ties with relatives who live nearby, or close ties with affiliated kin—nonrelated individuals who are accepted as part of the family. Among Latino and African American communities in particular, ties with affiliated kin are often stronger and more lasting than the ties established by blood or marriage. For the purposes of this book, we will use the term family to refer to a social institution common to all societies that organizes and unifies people into cooperative groups to care for one another.

History of the American Family

Popular 1970s television shows such as The Waltons and Little House on the Prairie idealized the “good old days” of the American family, in which people were poor but happy, and strong family ties were the norm rather than the exception. But did this golden age ever actually exist? A look at the history of the American family may debunk some of the persistent myths surrounding family life.

U.S. COLONIAL PERIOD TO 1899

When the first settlers arrived in North America in the 17th century, they joined more than a million Native Americans. By the end of the century, immigrants were arriving from all over Europe, and Africans were being forcibly shipped into the colonies to be sold as slaves, which disrupted their family ties. From the very beginning, families in the United States were culturally, ethnically, and religiously diverse.

Early colonial families were primarily nuclear families, made up of husband, wife, and children. However, unrelated individuals such as children from other families, apprentices, and hired laborers often joined colonial households to live and work. Fathers were regarded as the head of the family and exercised control over wives and children, often using physical force to discipline their young. The chances of a colonial child surviving to adulthood were far lower than they are today, with an infant mortality rate of one in every three children in some communities. Those children who did survive did not enjoy the lengthy childhood that an American youngster might expect today—by the age of six or seven, girls were put to work sewing or spinning, and boys were sent into the fields to help their fathers. By the age of 14, most colonial children were sent to live with other families to learn a trade.

Marital roles in colonial households were divided by gender, with husbands responsible for planting, harvesting, bookkeeping, and supervisory tasks, and wives in charge of cooking, sewing, milking, cleaning, and gardening. Colonial families were primarily a unit of production—they worked hard and were often beset by accidents, illness, and disease.

UNITED STATES: 1900 TO PRE-WWII

By the late 19th century, economic and political changes were altering traditional gender roles in American families. Women began campaigning for the right to vote and increasingly took on roles outside the home, attending universities and pursuing careers. Technological advances led to the mass production of goods, lessening the need for child labor, and schools assumed more responsibility for socializing and educating children. Medical advances also assisted the changing family structure, with decreasing infant mortality rates lessening the need for couples to have large families to ensure that some of their children survived.

During this time, public concern over family violence, child neglect, declining middle-class birth rates, divorce, and infant mortality was increasing, resulting in more government intervention in family life. Reformers helped pass compulsory school attendance laws and child labor restrictions. Organizations offering advice about child-rearing, parenting, and social policy were formed, leading to a shift in the way people viewed the family. Rather than a functional unit of production, the new family ideal was the companionate model, based on mutual affection, sexual fulfillment, and the sharing of domestic tasks and child rearing. From the large 19th-century family units developed smaller, more private family groups that focused on the emotional well-being of their members. Interpersonal relationships between spouses became the linchpin of family life.

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Although these changes promoted positive, caring relationships, they also led to an increase in divorce rates. Once spouses expected marriage to go hand in hand with emotional fulfillment, they became more willing to terminate unhappy relationships.

**U.S. MODERN ERA (WORLD WAR II TO PRESENT)**

Many people look back to the 1950s as the golden age of the traditional family, but was it really? Teenage pregnancy rates were higher in the 1950s than they are today, although a higher proportion of teenage mothers were married (primarily due to “shotgun weddings,” a colloquialism that developed from the idea that many fathers of pregnant girls had to force, possibly with a weapon, a man to marry his daughter once she became pregnant). Many families were unable to survive the traumas of war and its aftermath, and the divorce rate rose from one in six in 1940 to one in four marriages in 1946.11 Although many families prospered in the years following World War II, many others suffered from economic hardship. In 1948, Newsweek reported that most of the 27 million schoolchildren in the United States were badly in need of medical or dental care, while more than 900 thousand children were malnourished.12

The “golden age” of the 1950s was also a contributing factor to rising divorce rates in the 1960s and 1970s. When soldiers returned from the war, many women were forced to give up their factory jobs to make way for the returning veterans and encouraged to stay at home and assume domestic roles. As a result, birth rates increased and the average age at first marriage decreased. However, women began to feel increasingly trapped in their limited roles, and this tension eventually boiled over, resulting in the formation of the women's liberation movement in the 1960s. The typical family structure began to shift from father as breadwinner to dual-income families, in which both husband and wife worked outside the home. Since the 1960s, families have also grown smaller—in 2004, only 10 percent of women produced four or more children, compared to 36 percent of women in 1976—and more diverse.13

We will examine contemporary types of family variation in Chapter 9.

**Current Trends in Families**

By the end of *One True Thing*, Ellen begins to see the importance of the domestic role her mother played in the family. Supporters of traditional families argue that society functions best when families are made up of a breadwinner husband and a supportive wife who takes care of the domestic responsibilities at home. What implications might this have for

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**Marital Status of U.S. Population (over Age 15)**

contemporary families? Current trends include fewer marriages, fewer children, later age of marriage, and an increasing number of single-parent families and stepfamilies. Let's take a look at some recent U.S. statistics:

- Of 66.9 million opposite-sex couples living together in 2008, 60.1 million were married, and 6.8 million were not. The percentage of women aged 40 to 44 who were childless typically have fewer children today compared to earlier generations, with the birth rate over the last 20 years averaging around two births per woman (compared to four births per woman in the early 1900s).
- In 2008, the United States had an estimated 5.5 million “stay-at-home” parents: 5.3 million mothers and 140,000 fathers.
- In 2008, about 9 percent of all children (6.6 million) lived in a household that included a grandparent. Twenty-three percent of children living with a grandparent had no parent present.
- American families are overworked: In families without children, husbands and wives worked a combined average of 68 hours of paid work a week in 2000, compared to 58 hours a week in 1968. In families with children, parents worked an average of 64 hours of paid work a week in 2000, compared to 53 hours a week in 1968.

**FACTORS AFFECTING CURRENT TRENDS**

**Demographic Factors**

Sociologist John Weeks believes there are several reasons for the changing composition of modern households. People are living longer, increasing the likelihood that they will eventually be widowed or divorced—now that “til death do us part” might involve 60 or 70 years of living with the same person, people may be less inclined to follow through with their wedding day promises. Increased life expectancy also reduces the pressure to marry and have children early, resulting in a trend toward delayed marriage and the tendency to leave the parental nest at a much later age than previous generations. Between 1970 and 2000, the proportion of women who had never been married increased from 36 percent to 73 percent among women aged 20 to 24, and from 6 percent to 22 percent among 30- to 34-year-olds. Similar results were found for men. As we will see in Chapter 9, these statistics may be partially explained by the increasing rates of cohabitation before marriage. The longer cohabiting couples delay tying the knot, the less likely they are to eventually marry.

**Lifestyle Factors**

Over the past 40 years, a transition toward gender equality and the empowerment of women has also contributed to changing family structures. A combination of longer life and lower fertility means that women have more opportunities to pursue other goals and achieve economic and social independence. Prior to the 1970s, women typically worked only until they got married or became pregnant, which was reflected in the number of women in the labor force. In 1950, there were 29 female year-round full-time workers for every 100 males; by 2000 this figure had increased to 70 females working full-time per 100 male workers. Today, it is socially acceptable for women to juggle higher education and a career with raising a family, or to choose not to have a family at all—as we noted earlier, one in five women of childbearing age in the United States was childless (involuntarily without children) or “child-free” (voluntarily without children) in 2006. Despite the transition toward gender equality, however, it appears that we are not quite there yet. In 2001, the average female full-time worker earned just 75 percent of the income earned by males. And although Hillary Clinton came close in the 2008 presidential campaign, no female leader has yet served as President of the United States.

In addition to changing attitudes in the workplace, medical and legal developments have enabled women to have more choices when it comes to marriage and children. The advent of the contraceptive pill in the 1960s, combined with the legalization of abortion in 1973, gave women more reproductive options. Previously, women had little control over if or when they would have a family, but the pill allowed women the ability to plan when they were going to have a pregnancy as well as the number of children they had (if any). This allowed women to have relationships without being married and not worry about becoming pregnant. The reduced stigma of having a child out of wedlock also meant that women no longer felt the social pressure to marry or even remain in a relationship in the event of a pregnancy. In 2004, 1.2 million children in the United States were born out of wedlock.

Women are not the only demographic to benefit from a shift in attitudes concerning the family. Several states have legalized same-sex marriage in the past decade, with more likely to follow suit in the near future. Since Massachusetts became the first state to pass legislation in 2004, more than 10,000 gay and lesbian couples have exchanged vows there. Many same-sex couples are raising biological or adopted children. In 2005, an estimated 65,000 adopted children in the United States were living with a gay or lesbian parent.

**IS MARRIAGE IN TRANSITION OR DECLINE?**

Some social commentators view the high divorce statistics and increasing numbers of nontraditional families as symptoms of the weakening of the family and as an indication of its imminent demise. However, these dooms-and-gloom predictions are nothing new. In 1927, psychologist John B. Watson believed that family values had broken down to such an extent

<<< Hillary Clinton hoped to become the first female American president but lost the Democratic party nomination in the presidential primaries to Barack Obama in 2008.
Major Trends Affecting Families: South America in Perspective

Between 1950 and 2000, major structural changes took place in the countries of South America. Rapid urbanization shifted the majority of the population from rural areas to cities, and the number of women in the labor force rose from 20 percent to 40 percent.29 Urban poverty levels increased, affecting more than half the population in some countries. Most countries also experienced major political changes, with dictatorships giving way to democracies in the 1980s. With the new democratic governments came changes in legal and policy issues related to the family. So, how have these structural changes affected family dynamics in South America?

Changes in Family Structure

Although nuclear households are the most widespread form of residence in South America, the number of single-person households is on the increase. In Argentina, a country with a large number of older persons, the number of single-person homes rose from 11.3 percent in 1986 to 15.5 percent in 1999.30 Researchers attribute this partly to an aging population, but also to the growing number of young adults living by themselves before they marry and to the increasing number of divorcées who live alone.31 High rates of poverty and unemployment in urban areas have resulted in an increasing number of extended family households, in which family members move in together to pool their resources. In Brazil and Argentina, legislation has been proposed to legitimize same-sex unions for homosexual couples, and there has been a slow increase in the number of same-sex families.

As in the United States, statistics indicate lower marriage rates and higher cohabitation rates in the majority of the region.32 Greater freedom of choice and the reduction of social stigma have also resulted in higher divorce rates—a trend also attributed to the increasing financial independence of women, allowing them to escape violent or unhappy marriages. An increase in educational opportunities for women has also lowered birth rates, as women delay marriage and childhood to pursue professional opportunities. However, recognition of reproductive rights is a slow legal process in South American countries, with strong opposition from institutions such as the Catholic Church. Many women surveyed did not want an additional child when they became pregnant, and there is a clear gap between ideal family size and actual number of children.33

Emerging Issues

Several countries in South America have increasingly aging populations, resulting in progressively greater need for financial aid and care. Traditionally, families lived in extended networks with children taking care of their elderly parents, but a growth in state welfare services has taken some financial responsibility away from family members. As a result of increasing unemployment and poverty, the care process may be reversed in some cases, with elderly family members using their pensions or homes to help younger generations who are struggling.

Factors such as urbanization and new political regimes are changing family dynamics in South America.
that marriage was in danger of extinction, stating, “In 50 years, unless there is some change, the tribal custom of marriage will no longer exist.”

Other professionals look at marriage and family as being in a state of transition rather than decline. They view changes in family structures as evidence of the flexibility of marriage and family and the ability of each institution to adapt to modern life. In your opinion, is the American family in transition or decline?

**FUNCTIONS OF THE FAMILY**

Although families differ widely in structure, they all perform similar functions. In the 1930s, sociologist William Ogburn identified seven roles that families fulfill: economic security, social prestige and status, education and socialization of children, protection, religious tradition, recreation, and affection. More than 60 years later, contemporary sociologists have produced very similar lists, suggesting that although the structures of today’s families might have changed, the expectations for the roles of the family in society have remained relatively consistent.

**Economic Security**

One of the most important roles of a family unit is to provide financial security and stability for its members. This includes all the material resources needed for the family’s physical survival, such as food, shelter, and clothing. Due to the recent economic downturn and the collapse of large companies such as GM and Chrysler, many families are finding it increasingly difficult to provide financial security for their loved ones. A survey of 25 cities between October 2007 and September 2008 reported an 18 percent increase in the demand for food assistance, as well as an increase in homelessness of up to 30 percent in some cities.

**Social Prestige and Status**

Being part of a family provides us with a sense of place and belonging in society. The family in which we grow up is known as our *family of origin*, and it has many influences on our experiences in later life (see diagram).

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Being born or adopted into a loving family is arbitrary, but the effects of childhood family experiences are far-reaching.
Our families place us in a particular socioeconomic class, such as working class, middle class, or upper class. As you will learn in Chapter 11, social class affects many aspects of family life, including when people marry, how many children they have, and how they raise their children.37

**Education and Socialization**

Although an increasing number of married couples are choosing to remain child-free, many plan to have a family. Procreation is an essential function in society—without the production or adoption of children, there would be no way of replacing elderly members as they die off. Developments in technology such as artificial insemination and in vitro fertilization have enabled many couples to reproduce who might otherwise remain childless.

Once a couple becomes parents, they are responsible for the education and socialization of their offspring. Socialization is the shaping of an individual’s behavior to conform to social or cultural norms. Consciously or unconsciously, parents teach their children the values, attitudes, and beliefs of their culture.

**Protection**

Whom did you run to as a child when you fell off your bike and cut your knee? The family provides physical as well as economic protection for its members. This is a reciprocal relationship between parents and children—while parents take care of their children at a young age, children later return the favor by providing economic and psychological assistance in their parents’ old age.

**Religious Tradition**

If parents belong to a religion, they will usually provide their children with a religious identity by performing traditions particular to that religion. A Christian family may say grace before meals, read passages from the Bible together, and celebrate Christmas and Easter, while a Jewish family may fast during Yom Kippur and celebrate Hanukkah together.

**Recreation**

Traditionally, the family was a source of recreation. Families gathered together to read stories or play musical instruments. Some sociologists argue that this function is being replaced by outside agencies such as Little League sports teams, computer games, and the hundreds of TV channels now available in the average American home.38

**Affection**

Studies consistently show that married couples and adults who live with others are happier and healthier than people who live alone.39 Intimacy and affection are basic human needs, and families provide each other with a source of companionship.

**DIVERSITY IN FAMILIES**

No two families are the same—families differ in socioeconomic status, structure, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and lifestyle choice. There are many interpretations of family diversity, although we generally use it to mean variation in family structures, experiences, and circumstances between families. Let’s take a look at one aspect of family diversity in depth: race and ethnicity.

**DIVERSITY IN RACE AND ETHNICITY**

Race and ethnicity are frequently confused, but they are not synonymous. A race is a group of people who are classified according to their phenotype—anatomical and physical characteristics of individuals, such as skin color. An ethnic group is a group of people characterized by cultural factors, such as language, religion, and shared customs, that are passed from one generation to the next.

**African American Families**

According to 2007 statistics, more than 38.5 million African Americans live in the United States, comprising 12.8 percent of the total population.36 Although they are no more likely to be divorced or widowed, a greater percentage of blacks than whites have never been married (46 percent compared with 28 percent). African Americans have higher divorce rates and unmarried birth rates than the general population, and more than 30 percent of black households are headed by women with no husbands present, compared to 12 percent in the population overall.37 However, many of these characteristics are associated with poverty rather than race; if divorce rates are adjusted according to socioeconomic status, racial differences are minimal.

**Hispanic Families**

Hispanics are the largest and fastest growing ethnic group in the United States; projected figures indicate that by 2050, at least 25 percent of the population will be of Hispanic origin. The combination of immigration and higher birthrates among Hispanics are the primary reasons for this projected increase.38 Within the Hispanic community, there is considerable diversity in ethnic heritage (for example, Mexican, Puerto Rican, or Cuban), and socioeconomic status, making it difficult to generalize familial characteristics. For example, the percentage of unmarried Hispanic mothers ranges from 27 percent among Cubans, to 41 percent among Mexicans, to 60 percent among Puerto Ricans.39

**Asian American Families**

In 2007, there were 13.3 million Asian Americans in the United States, comprising just over four percent of the total population.40 Asian Americans are more likely to be married than whites (61 percent compared with 55 percent), but only half as likely to be divorced (5 percent compared with 11 percent). They typically have fewer children than other groups and tend to have their children later and within marriage. Only six percent of Asian American births occur to teenage mothers, compared to 23 percent of African American births and 18 percent of
Every other weekend, Tyler visits his local homeless shelter to help prepare meals for families and individuals in need. He has been volunteering at the shelter for more than two years.

"Before I started helping out at Doorways, I had an image of the stereotypical homeless person in my head—an elderly war veteran with an alcohol abuse problem. “I’ve seen maybe a few people at the shelter that fit the type, but they are definitely in the minority.

"Most of the people we provide with transitional housing—probably about 70 percent—are families with children.

“This was completely shocking to me because I grew up in a very middle-class neighborhood and had the attitude that homelessness was caused by mental illness or drug abuse.

“Meeting families similar to mine that had fallen on hard times was a shock.

We have a lot of them at the moment because of the economic downturn—people who lost their jobs and couldn’t pay the rent or mortgage.

“Most of the families we take in, though, are young-single mothers and their children.

“Sadly, they’re usually escaping from violent husbands or partners. Since I’ve been helping at the shelter, the regular staff have managed to get many families into permanent affordable housing, which is a very satisfying feeling.”
think marriages and families: **HOW DO DIFFERENT THEORISTS VIEW THE FAMILY?**

**THEORIES OF THE FAMILY**

Social scientists use experiments, surveys, observation, and secondary data analysis to test hypothesis and form theories—or proposed explanations that have not been proven as fact—about family dynamics. Qualitative research attempts to provide a full picture of family issues through case studies, ethnographies, and focus groups. Sociologists have many opposing theories about the structure, composition, and behavior of families and family members. In this chapter, we will examine nine different viewpoints.

**Structural-Functional Theory**

Remember the story about the bike at the beginning of the chapter? The explanation about all the different parts of society functioning in an interrelated way is an example of structural-functional theory (commonly known as functional theory). Functional theorists examine the family from a macro level, looking at society from a broad, global approach. Imagine looking out of an airplane window from 30,000 feet up. You can’t see the finer details, but you are able to see the Earth’s surface right out to the horizon.

One of the most influential functionalists was Talcott Parsons, who developed his theories in the 1950s and 1960s. Parsons believed that human behavior is driven by people's efforts to conform to the moral codes of society and that these moral codes constrain human behavior to promote the common good. For society to survive, its subsystems (families and other organizations) must function in a way that promotes the maintenance of society as a whole. There are two central assumptions in functional theory: The main function of families is to procreate and socialize children, and the family, as a system, needs to maintain its basic structure.

For Parsons, the ideal structure was illustrated by the Gulden family in *One True Thing*—a post-World War II isolated nuclear family style, consisting of husband, wife, and children. Parsons argued that the husband’s role was breadwinner of the family and the wife’s role was to maintain family relations; these were the dominant social values and norms. When men and women conform to the norms of society, they raise healthy children, but failure to conform throws society into disequilibrium, resulting in dysfunctional outcomes such as divorce and juvenile delinquency.

Structural functional theory ground to a halt in the 1960s and 1970s, with the huge increase in same-sex couples, single-parent families, and blended families. Having no way of accounting for these family variations except to label them as “deviant,” the weakness of structural functionalist theory was exposed—it was unable to account for social change. However, elements of functionalism still survive today. Members of the marriage movement promote traditional marriage and protest legal policies that would legalize same-sex marriage. Researchers study the effects of divorce on children and question whether working mothers negatively affect their children’s well-being. And the nuclear or traditional family is still used as the benchmark against which all alternative or “deviant” lifestyles are measured.

**Conflict Theory**

Conflict theory stems from Karl Marx’s idea that those who control the resources have all the power. Whereas functionalists believe that conflict plays a minor role in family life and that the ultimate goal is for a balanced and peaceful household, conflict theorists believe that conflict is inevitable and necessary. Individual family members are motivated to pursue their own needs, values, and goals, which often conflict with the needs, values, and goals of other family members, resulting in a struggle for power. For example, at the beginning of *One True Thing*, Ellen wants to stay in New York to pursue her career, while her father wants her to return home to take care of her mother. According to conflict theorists, sources of power within a family include legitimacy, money, physical coercion, and love. In the film, George uses both his position as Ellen’s father and her love for her mother to persuade her to return home.

Conflict theorists believe that conflict within families is necessary because it results in change and adaptation. People who have power want to maintain the status quo, while people without power want to change the system to make it fairer. Current examples include the campaign for same-sex marriage legislation, demands to close the salary gap between men and women, and affirmative action policies that support equal opportunities for racial and ethnic minorities. Conflict theorists examine how these inequalities may be passed down through different generations, for example, via the socialization of children and traditional male/female division of household labor.

**Feminist Theory**

Compare the portrayal of women in family sitcoms before 1950 and after 1980 and you will likely see a marked difference in gender roles. For example, June Cleaver from Leave It to Beaver is often seen in the kitchen fixing meals for her family or entertaining the ladies of the neighborhood as part of her social club. On the other hand, Clair Huxtable from The Cosby Show works outside the home as a lawyer and is often seen as the disciplinarian of the family. These changes reflect a cultural shift during the 1960s and 1970s, known as the modern feminist movement or the second wave of feminism (the first wave occurred during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when women campaigned for the right to vote). During the second wave of feminism, leaders such as Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and the National Organization for Women (NOW) campaigned on issues such as equal pay and job training for women, reproductive choice, maternity leave, child care, and an end to sex discrimination.

Today, feminists support equality for men and women in all contexts of public and private life.

From the feminist movement grew feminist theory, in which scholars base their work on several assumptions. They view women’s experiences as central to an understanding of the family as a whole, focusing on women’s perspectives and feelings. They believe that gender is socially constructed and that the roles of husbands and wives are defined by society rather than biology. Contrary to the functionalist viewpoint, feminist theorists believe that the nuclear family is an inadequate description of families in modern society and that limiting families to the nuclear description restricts women’s roles to subordinate positions. Rather than
the maintenance of social order, feminist theorists place emphasis on social change and challenging the status quo. Finally, feminist theorists believe that there is no neutral observation of humans—rather than treating the family as a whole, feminist theorists explore the individual experiences of each family member.51

Symbolic Interaction Theory

Symbolic interactionists figuratively put families under a microscope on a daily basis, by examining the family on a micro level. Interactionists believe that individuals develop a sense of self through their interactions with others. We develop a sense of self based on the reactions of the people we care about and by our perception of these reactions. The way in which we interpret people's opinions of us then becomes a dominant aspect of our own identities—a concept that sociologist Charles H. Cooley referred to as the "looking-glass self."52 In other words, some of our actions and behaviors may be the result of self-fulfilling prophecies. For example, a teenaged boy might interpret his father’s coldness toward him as an indication that he is not good enough for his father. Feeling that he is unable to gain his father's approval, the teenager begins to cut classes in school and eventually flunks out. His father is disappointed in him, fulfilling the son’s expectations that he will never be good enough in his father’s eyes.

Conflict theorists view the current dispute over same-sex marriage as a power struggle, with the people in power fighting to maintain the status quo. Is change inevitable as society evolves?
CHAPTER 01

Ecological Theory

Developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner argued that in order to study a child’s development, it is necessary to look beyond the child’s immediate environment and consider the interaction between the child’s biological makeup and wider external factors. Bronfenbrenner identified five environmental systems that influence the family: microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems.

The microsystem is the child’s immediate environment, including any immediate relationships or organizations that the child interacts with, such as family members or teachers at school. The mesosystem describes how different parts of the child’s microsystem interact. For example, children whose parents play an active role in their education often do better in school than children with poorer home-school linkages. The exosystem includes outside influences that the child may not interact with personally, but that have a large impact on the child. If a parent receives a promotion and spends many more hours at work, the relationship with his or her child may be affected. Many studies consider the impact of mothers working full-time, the effects of parental unemployment on families, and the amount of time parents spend with their children.

On a wider level, the macrosystem describes the culture in which an individual lives, including the relative freedoms permitted by the national government, cultural values, and the economy—all of which may affect a child positively or negatively. Finally, Bronfenbrenner considers chronosystems, research models that examine the impact of normative and nonnormative life transitions on family processes and child development over time. Normative transitions might include puberty, changing schools, marriage, and retirement, whereas nonnormative transitions might include unexpected events within a family, such as death or divorce.

Social Exchange Theory

Why might you choose to live with your parents instead of moving into an apartment by yourself? Or opt to get married rather than remain single? According to social exchange theorists, human behaviors and interactions are based on a series of rewards and costs. Rewards are the pleasures or satisfactions we enjoy from participating in a relationship. Costs are the negative outcomes, energy invested, or rewards foregone as a result of choosing one behavior over another. Comparison level of alternatives is the evaluation by individuals of their relationships in the light of available alternatives. Boundaries are emotional barriers that define a system and separate the system from its environment and other systems. Rules of transformation are the means by which a system governs the way in which inputs from the environment are changed to outputs. Subsystem is part of a system that can be analyzed separately in relation to its exchanges with the system and with other subsystems. Variety is the extent to which a system is able to adapt to changes in the environment.

Family Systems Theory

According to family systems theorists, individuals cannot be understood in isolation because they are part of an interconnected and interdependent system—a family. Family systems theory originated in Ludwig von Bertalanffy’s work on general systems theory in the 1940s, which posited that organisms are complex, organized, and interactive. Family systems theory includes several key concepts:

1. Systems have boundaries. Every system has emotional barriers that define the system and separate the system from its environment and other systems. No family is a completely open or closed system, although some families may be more willing than others to allow outsiders into the household.

2. Systems have internal rules of transformation that govern the way in which inputs from the environment are changed to outputs. For example, family inputs might include goods and services, and outputs might include the behaviors of family members and socialization of children.

3. Systems have subsystems that can be analyzed separately in relation to their exchanges with the system and with other subsystems. In family units, these subsystems might include parent-child subsystems, sibling subsystems, and marital subsystems.
Systems have different degrees of **variety**—the extent to which the system is able to adapt to changes in the environment. Systems that are unable to adapt to change may malfunction (or develop family rifts). For example, a family with strict Catholic views about sex before marriage may be unable to adapt to a teenage pregnancy within the family, causing a rupture in the family system.

**Family Life Course/Development Theory**

How do relationships between husbands and wives change with the birth of their first child? Does the relationship shift when that child goes to school or leaves the family home? Family development theorists attempt to answer questions such as these by studying transitions within marriage and family over time. Early development theorists viewed family development as proceeding through life cycle stages, with each stage marked by a different set of norms or expectations. Typical stages included early marriage, living with young children, children leaving home, and the empty nest.\(^5\)

However, the concept of stages is problematic, partly because there are many different ways of categorizing the stages of family development, and partly because the traditional stages (marriage, children, retirement) do not include relevant categories for single-parent families, childless families, remarried families, and many other family forms. Early researchers developed the misleading view that if certain conditions were met in a stage, then the family could successfully move onto the next stage of development, implying both a causal effect and suggesting that there was a “normal” process of family development. Furthermore, some stages may not be mutually exclusive. For example, Duvall and Hill included “families with schoolchildren” and “families with adolescents” as two separate categories, yet many families have children of both ages.\(^4\)

To address some of these criticisms, Joan Aldous suggested modifying the idea of a family life cycle, instead focusing on a “family career.”\(^1\) This allowed for the possibility that different families had different “career” paths, which might include divorce, remarriage, cohabitation, and remaining single.

**Biosocial Theory**

Biosocial theorists view human behavior in the family setting as an intricate interaction of genes and the environment. Developed from Darwin’s theory of evolution, anthropologist P.L. van de Berghe argued that the human family was the earliest social institution and could be reduced to three principles: **nepotism** (favoritism shown to one’s kin), **reciprocity** (the exchange of favors), and **coercion** (being forced to act against one’s interests).\(^1\) Of these, the concept of nepotism, or kin selection, is the most important. Individuals attempt to maximize the transmission of their genes to the next generation. Because we share genes with our siblings, their reproductive success is related to ours. In other words, we are genetically predisposed to favor our siblings to ensure that they reproduce and carry on the family genes. Van de Berghe argues that parents also maximize their chances of reproductive success by either having few children and investing a lot of care and attention in them or by having many children to ensure the survival of some. The chosen method depends on the environment—higher fertility is preferable in a hostile, unstable environment (for example, where there is a high likelihood of disease, war, or famine), whereas lower fertility is suited to a stable environment (for example, in Western cultures with good health care, food, and educational resources).\(^2\)

Although biosocial theory has been criticized for its overstatement of biological influences, much research has focused on the interaction between biological and societal influences, including odor communication between mothers and infants, kin recognition and attachment, and violence and abuse within families.
Conflict theorists view conflict as a means of social change and adaptation. How might a struggle for power lead to a change in social structure?

**How Do Families Influence Individuals?**

**FUNCTIONALISM**

According to functionalists, an individual is given the best possible chance of success if he or she is raised in a traditional nuclear family. When a family consists of a breadwinner husband, a wife who maintains strong family relations, and their biological children, it conforms to the dominant set of values and norms in Western societies. As a result, the family performs its intended function within society and the children grow up to be happy, healthy, and well-adjusted individuals. Conversely, children who grow up in nontraditional households (for example divorced or single-parent homes) are more likely to participate in deviant behavior. Although functionalism died out in the 1960s and 1970s, many Americans still consider the nuclear family the ideal family type and use it as a benchmark against which to measure nontraditional families. When researchers consider the impact of divorce on children, the educational attainment of children from single-parent families, or the behavior of adopted children in same-sex families, they also use children from nuclear families as a benchmark for comparison.

**CONFLICT THEORY**

Conflict theorists believe that individuals within a family are motivated to act in their own interests. Because these interests often differ from the interests of other family members, conflict becomes inevitable. Siblings fight over the TV remote control, husbands and wives compete for time with the children, and parents argue with their children about completing homework on time. Families are divided into hierarchies, with parents exerting power over children and men traditionally exerting power over their wives. These family hierarchies reflect wider inequalities in society in relation to race, class, and gender. Conflict theorists view conflict as an instrument for social change, in which people who have power struggle to maintain the status quo, whereas people without power fight to change the system to make it fairer. If we look at the family as a microcosm of society in general, we can see how families teach children the principles of conflict and negotiation from an early age.

**SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM**

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, individuals are shaped through their interactions with others. Through these interactions (and our interpretation of them), we develop a sense of self. Since we spend a large proportion of our time with immediate family members, the family plays an important role in developing our identities, or self-concepts. According to symbolic interactionists, we learn to see ourselves as other people do—their reactions to us serve as a type of mirror reflecting our image so that we can see it (the “looking-glass self” concept). One study that supported this concept examined the behavior of three groups of schoolchildren. The children in the first group were repeatedly told that they were tidy, the children in the second group were told that they should be tidy, while the third group was not told anything unusual. After observing the amount of litter each group dropped, researchers noted that the children in the first group were the tidiest—being labeled as tidy caused them to develop a new self-concept and behave accordingly.

**FUNCTIONALISTS** believe that social deviance results from failure to conform to the dominant set of values and norms in Western societies. Do you agree that children from nontraditional homes are disadvantaged by their backgrounds?
discover marriages and families in action:
WHAT IS THE MEANING OF FAMILY?

Perspectives of the Family

What is a family? As we have already observed, there are many different opinions about what constitutes a family, making it difficult to formulate a single definition. Let’s look at the family from three different angles: the perspective of society, the perspective of small groups, and the perspective of the individual.

SOCIETAL PERSPECTIVE

In many countries, family has a very narrow legal definition, meaning either a nuclear family of married parents and their biological children under the age of 18, or blood relatives. Other groups of people who might consider themselves a family, for example same-sex couples or cohabiting couples, do not qualify for Social Security benefits or other types of governmental aid. Stepparents have no legal rights over their partners’ biological children unless they legally adopt them. Organizations from multinational companies to small businesses may also assume this narrow definition of family, limiting employees’ rights to a leave of absence after the death of a relative or after the birth of a child.

SMALL-GROUP PERSPECTIVE

Examining the concept of family from a small-group perspective, we may classify particular groups of people as families or not. Do a single parent and child make up a family? What about a cohabiting couple with a child? Or a married couple without children? A family may be seen to include large numbers of people related by blood or marriage. This same group may also be classified as extended family, or a kin group. In some non-Western cultures, obligations toward extended families may be stronger than obligations toward more immediate family members. For example, in one form of Cantonese marriage, women do not live with their husbands until at least three years after their marriage, because their primary duties are to their own extended families.66

INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVE

On the most personal level, we can look at the family from the perspective of the individual. Some people consider their pets to be members of their family, while others might only include their parents, children, or siblings. Being biologically related might not even be sufficient to be counted as a family member. One researcher found that 19 percent of the children living with biological siblings did not identify their brothers or sisters as family members, while stepparents, stepsiblings, stepchildren, and absent or divorced parents were also frequently omitted from the list.67

MAKE CONNECTIONS

Marriage and Family

As you have learned in this chapter, there is no standardized definition of the family. Personal experiences and individual living situations cause family to mean something different to everyone. In Chapter 4, we will look at how gender affects marriage and family and examine traditional and nontraditional gender roles within families.

Although some argue that functionalist theory may be outdated, its notion of family as the most important unit within society still holds true. As the feminist slogan says, “The personal is the political.” In other words, things that happen in society can and do affect the family, and vice versa. In Chapter 12, we will examine how the family relates to other social institutions, including education, politics, religion, and the legal system.

ACTIVITY

Write down a list of everyone you consider to be a member of your family. Compare your list with your family and friends.

ACTIVITIES

1. Ask three of your friends to write a definition of what family means to them. Compare their answers with your own. Are there similarities and differences? Why or why not?

2. Locate a scholarly social science database at your university library. You may be able to access this via the Internet. Perform a search using the key word family. What type of articles do you locate about the family? Browse through the search results. Are there similar themes or different topics?
WHAT DEFINES A FAMILY, AND WHAT ARE THE HISTORICAL AND CURRENT TRENDS IN MARRIAGES AND FAMILIES? 5

Marriage in the United States is a legally recognized union between a man and a woman, although broader definitions take same-sex couples and cohabiting couples into account. A family is a group of two or more people related by birth, marriage, or adoption that reside together. Current trends in the United States include fewer marriages, fewer children, later age of marriage, and an increasing number of single-parent families and stepfamilies.

HOW DO DIFFERENT THEORISTS VIEW THE FAMILY? 14

Structural functionalists view the family as a system that promotes the maintenance of society, with the traditional nuclear family as the ideal form. Conflict theorists believe that individual family members are involved in a constant power struggle and that conflict within families is necessary because it results in change and adaptation. Symbolic interactionists believe that individuals develop a sense of self through their interactions with others.

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF FAMILY? 19

The meaning of family changes according to whether you are looking at it from the perspective of society, a small-group perspective, or an individual perspective.

Theory

FUNCTIONALISM 14
- an individual is given the best possible chance of success if he or she is raised in a traditional nuclear family
- the nuclear family is a benchmark against which to measure nontraditional families

CONFLICT THEORY 14
- individuals within a family are motivated to act in their own interests
- families are divided into hierarchies, which reflect the hierarchies in society

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM 15
- individuals are shaped through their interactions with others
- the family plays an important role in developing self-concept

Key Terms

stressor is a situation or event causing stress 4
marriage is a legally recognized union between a man and a woman 5
monogamous marriage is a type of marriage in which one person is married to another person of the opposite sex 5
polygamous marriage is a type of marriage in which one person is married to multiple husbands or wives 5
arranged marriage is a type of marriage in which the families of the bride and groom negotiate an arrangement before the two parties enter into a relationship 5
family is a group of two people or more related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together 6
household refers to all people who occupy a housing unit regardless of relationship 6
affiliated kin are nonrelated individuals who are accepted as part of a family 7
family of origin describes the family in which an individual is raised 11
socialization is the shaping of an individual’s behavior to conform to social or cultural norms 12
family diversity refers to the variation in family structures, experiences, and circumstances between families 12
race is a group of people who are classified according to their phenotype 12
phenotype refers to the anatomical and physical characteristics that distinguish one race from another 12
ethnic group is a group of people characterized by cultural factors, such as language, religion, and shared customs, that are passed from one generation to the next 12
looking-glass self is a concept of self in which interpretations of other people’s opinions become a dominant aspect of identity 15
self is the concept of identity that develops through interactions with others 15
Sample Test Questions

MULTIPLE CHOICE

These multiple-choice questions are similar to those found in the test bank that accompanies this textbook.

1. Which of these statements is TRUE of marriages in all cultures?
   a. Marriage is a legal union between one man and one woman.
   b. Marriage is a voluntary union between two parties.
   c. Marriage establishes rights and obligations related to gender.
   d. Marriage is only legally recognized if individuals are over the age of 16.

2. Which of these is NOT a current trend in modern households?
   a. fewer marriages
   b. fewer children
   c. delayed marriage
   d. more nuclear families

3. Which of the following theorists examine the family on a micro level?
   a. Functional theorists
   b. Conflict theorists
   c. Feminist theorists
   d. Social interactionist theorists

4. One effect of increased life expectancy is:
   a. a trend toward delayed marriage.
   b. a trend toward lower divorce rates.
   c. a trend toward higher birth rates.
   d. a trend toward early marriage.

5. Which of these statements would MOST LIKELY be voiced by a functionalist?
   a. Variety in family structures shows that marriage and family are in transition.
   b. Conflict within families is a necessary instrument for social change.
   c. Family members develop a sense of self through their interactions with others.
   d. The traditional nuclear family is the only form that promotes stability within society.

ANSWERS: 1. c; 2. d; 3. d; 4. a; 5. d

ESSAY

1. Discuss the current trends in marriage and family in the United States.
2. What factors should you keep in mind when reading and interpreting statistics about racial diversity?
3. Discuss whether the “golden age” of the traditional nuclear family ever really existed.
4. Choose three theories of marriage and family, and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each.
5. Discuss how definitions of family may vary according to perspective.

WHERE TO START YOUR RESEARCH PAPER

For more data on current marriage statistics, go to http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss.htm

For more data on current trends in household compositions, go to http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html

For more information about marriage laws in the United States, go to http://www.usmarriagelaws.com/search/united_states/index.shtml

To find out more about changing trends in the working family, go to http://www.pbs.org/livelyhood/workingfamily/familytrends.html

To learn more about legal trends in marriage, including information about the campaign to legalize same-sex marriage, go to http://www.hrc.org/issues/marriage.asp

For more information about Hispanic households in the United States, go to http://www.lasculturas.com/aa/spec/blcensus2000b.htm

To find out more about the history of the family, go to http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761558266/family.html

For global statistics on marriage and family, including birth rates and size of households, go to http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html

Remember to check www.thethinkspot.com for additional information, downloadable flashcards, and other helpful resources.