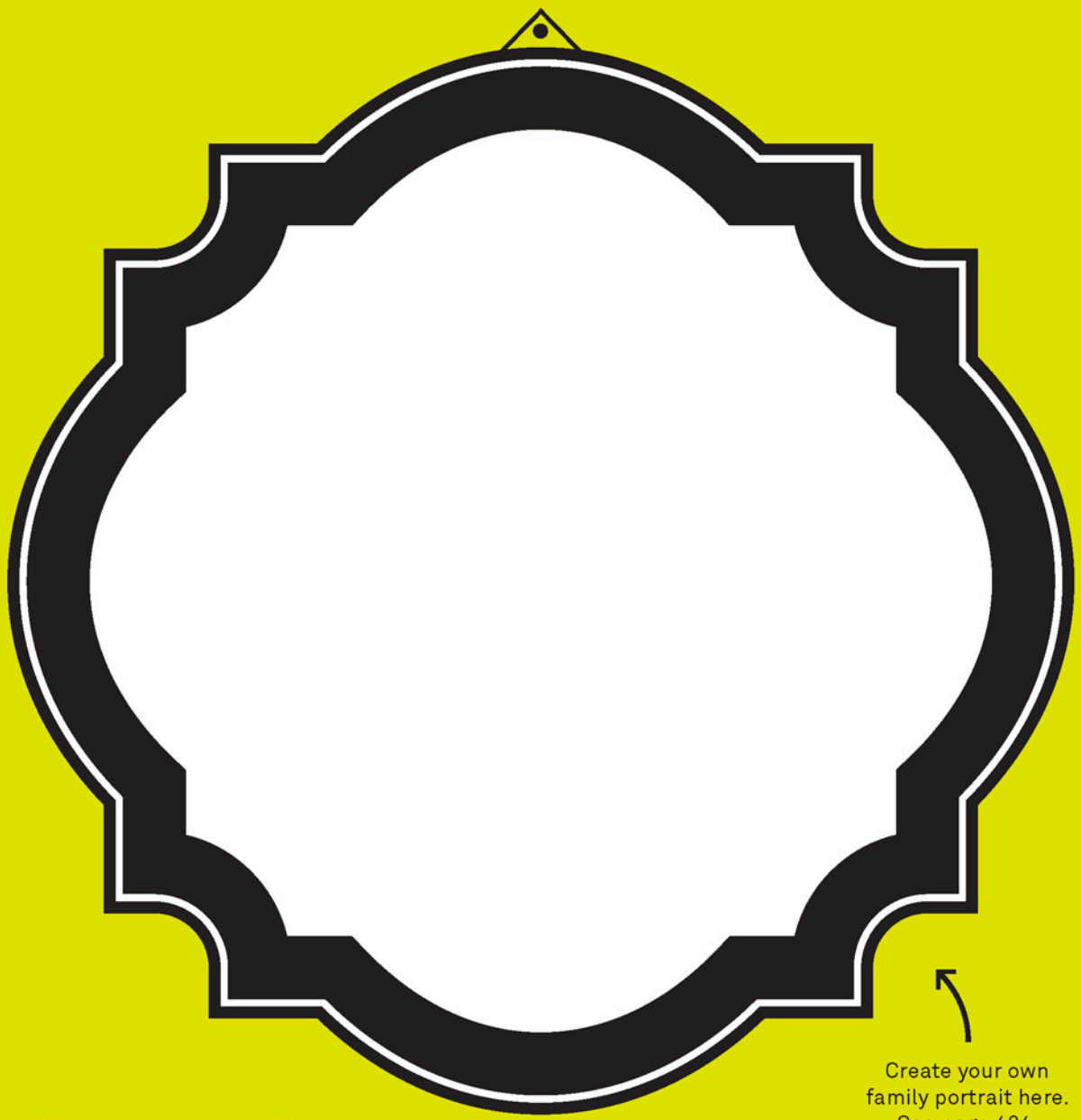
The Family

Diversity, Inequality, and Social Change



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Philip N. Cohen
Author of FamilyInequality.com

The Family

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Printed in the United States of America
First Edition

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Composition: Brad Walrod/Kenoza Type, Inc.
Illustrations: Kiss Me I'm Polish LLC, New York; Jouve
Manufacturing: Transcontinental

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cohen, Philip N.
The family : diversity, inequality, and social change / Philip N. Cohen, University of Maryland. — First edition.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-393-93395-6 (pbk.)
1. Families—United States. I. Title.
HQ536.C68 2015
306.850973—dc23 2014020492

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10110-0017
wwnorton.com
W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., Castle House, 75/76 Wells Street, London W1T 3QT

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

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Diversity, Inequality, and Social Change

Philip N. Cohen
Author of FamilyInequality.com

W.W. NORTON & COMPANY
NEW YORK • LONDON

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About the Author

Philip N. Cohen, Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland, is the founder of the blog FamilyInequality.com. He has published extensively on family structure, the gender division of labor within families, and inequality in the labor force. He has written for such publications as the *New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, and *Time*, and has appeared on radio and TV, including NPR and MSNBC.

Preface

This book started with a question: Is "the family" an outdated institution, out of place in modern society, perpetuating inequality and irrational ideas; or is it a "haven in a heartless world," (Lasch 1978) a place of protection from the encroaching reach of the government and the ravages of the market economy, the last bastion of human loyalty—not to mention, love? As is often the case in academic careers, I spent some years working around the edges of this question and thinking of different ways to approach it. In my research I looked at concrete but narrow questions I could address with data analysis. I studied the demography of children and families, the division of housework between husbands and wives, the pattern of women's entry into the paid labor force, trends in divorce rates, and children's well-being.

However, publishing in academic journals, important as it is, can be a lonely business. To broaden the conversation, and expand my own focus to more general questions, eventually I took the project in two new directions: writing a blog (Family Inequality) several times a week, and writing a textbook over the course of (so far) six years. On the blog I processed the daily stream of news, controversy, and conversation in a format that engaged students, teachers, and the reading public. And for the textbook I tried to fit my question within the much larger tradition of social science research on the family, using the best information I could find to shape a course around the most pressing issues. Eventually, I hoped, rather than answering the question (which I never did), the project would give a new generation of students some information and tools they might use to ask their own questions on the subject.

The themes of this book—diversity, inequality, and social change—emerged as I moved back and forth between these streams of work: academic research, blogging, and exploring the massive body of family scholarship for the textbook. Here is how I see them.

- *Diversity*. The cultural, political, legal, and technological changes of our era lead to new family patterns. We face growing diversity in the timing of family events, the forms that families take, and the nature of intimate relationships. People in modern society probably have more family life choices to make than ever before, as seen in the demographic trends on everything from the timing of births to cohabitation and marriage, divorce, remarriage, and new family structures.

- *Inequality*. Even with all these choices, of course, everyone's options are constrained by various forces, but to very different degrees. Poverty, discrimination, and institutional restrictions are barriers to achieving family ideals. And because family structures and experiences have life-changing consequences for health, wealth, and well-being, growing inequality means the stakes are increasing.

- *Social change*. In the new modern era, people must justify their choices, to themselves and to others, because choice is how people frame diversity. In the absence of strong pressure for conformity, differences matter: we may get credit if things go well along our many different paths, but people will

also judge us if things turn out badly. The elevation of personal choice to an ideal means everyone is held accountable for their family life, which is one reason many students want to take a course like this one.

As I pursued these themes throughout the book, the process was shaped by the unique combination of my training, work style, and theoretical approach. These have become pedagogical tools.

- In addition to my training as a sociologist, I also learned the tools of *demographic analysis*, and how to work with population data on children, families, family structure, and social transformation. As a result, I often investigate social change by analyzing demographic trends. That demographic perspective runs throughout the book.

- To figure out what's happening, and why, I produce many *graphs and charts*—comparing trends, contrasting the numbers for different groups, looking for problems and questions I haven't considered. The figures are both exploratory and illustrative. A selection of these figures appears in the book—much improved by the design work of Kiss Me I'm Polish's Agnieszka Gasparska and Rachel Matts—in a feature we have called the "Story Behind the Numbers."

- As I reviewed material for the book, looking for ways to organize it and explain it to students, I have come to turn frequently to the *theory of modernity* (described in Chapter 1). That means I ask questions about individual identity and institutional dynamics, personal freedom and the need for self-definition in modern society. Whether students and instructors come to adopt this perspective or not, I have found it serves as a useful frame for translating the questions in the book into the language of personal experiences.

There are two other aspects of the writing I should mention at the outset. First, sometimes in academic writing we try to be comprehensive and provide citations to as many studies as possible that confirm a particular pattern of facts or explain the theory behind our work. That doesn't work very well for students who are approaching a subject for the first time. Instead, I have tried to provide specific references to the source of the information I used, and then, when making more general points, either to refer to a classic book or article, or to a recent study that exemplifies the point (and that includes within it many more references for background). So for those interested in digging deeper, I encourage you to follow the references to the subjects that interest you, to see what they wrote and what they read to get there. Second, with regard to data and figures, I have done a lot of my own calculations and analysis here. In those cases, there is no one place you can go to look up the numbers I use, but I have provided information about the data source.

Acknowledgments

I have a wonderful collection of debts to acknowledge, beginning with my editor, Karl Bakeman. Karl persuaded me that I could write this book, and he was right, but only because of him. From beginning to end, his insights, encouragement, and great humor made this project not only possible, but also interesting and even fun. I am deeply indebted to him. The rest of the team at Norton was helpful, diligent, and extremely supportive, including developmental editors Beth Ammerman and Harry Haskell, editorial assistants Becky Charney and Lindsey Thomas, associate editors Kate Feighery and Nicole Sawa, media editor Eileen Connell, associate media editor Laura Musich, project editor Linda Feldman, associate design director Hope Miller Goodell, marketing manager Julia Hall, text permissions manager Megan Jackson, assistant photo editor Evan Luberger, photo researcher Rona Tuccillo, sales specialists Julie Sindel and Jonathan Mason, and digital marketer Natasha Zabohonski.

I had the pleasure of working with four research assistants on this book: Amy Lucas, Emily Danforth, Rebecca Rodriguez, and Lucia Lykke. Each brought her own energy and perspective to make a valuable contribution to the process as well as the final project. At various times I consulted with, nagged, or bored a long list of colleagues. We shared questions about theories, sources, and data; false leads, tirades, and (my) personal angst; and the occasional celebration. They include: Andy Andrews, Neal Caren, Anjani Chandra, Claudia Geist, Jackie Hagan, Amy Harmon, Amie Hess, Matt Huffman, Jeehye Kang, Meredith Kleykamp, Rose Kreider, Beth Latshaw, Heather Laube, Jay Livingston, Kate McFarland, Melissa Milkie, Lisa Pearce, Joanna Pepin, Jen'nan Read, Cheryl Roberts, Liana Sayer, Pamela Smock, Reeve Vanneman, and Kristi Williams. At key points I was the beneficiary of guidance and support from Andrew Cherlin, Stephanie Coontz, Barbara Risman, and the members of the Council on Contemporary Families, on whose board I serve. Michael Hout and Emily Beller generously shared computer code. (Many more have contributed to helpful social media conversations.)

The wider network of family and friends can't be listed here, but first among them is my wife, Judy Ruttenberg, whose contributions and kindness I appreciate beyond words; and our beautiful children, Charlotte and Ruby. For supporting me in this and other things, I also thank my parents, Avis and Marshall Cohen, and: Ness and Heather Blackbird, Rhoda Ruttenberg, Miriam Ruttenberg and Peter Kraft, Daphne Olive and Dubi Paltshik, Ramsey Brous and Melissa Burress, and Scott Matthews.

While I wrote, Karl coordinated a rolling panel of reviewers providing feedback on the chapter drafts. These are experts in teaching this material, and their perspectives were invaluable as we shaped and reshaped the text:

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Adrienne Bey, Wilmington University
Kimberly P. Brackett, Auburn University at Montgomery
Jessica Burke, Francis Marion University
Daniel Carlson, Georgia State University

Noelle Chesley, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
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Linda Rouse, University of Texas at Arlington
Jerry Shepperd, Austin Community College
Jennifer Smith, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay
Susan Stewart, Iowa State University
Brooke Strahn-Koller, Kirkwood Community College
Jessi Streib, Duke University
Heather Sullivan-Catlin, SUNY Potsdam
Katherine Trent, University at Albany, SUNY
Ana Villalobos, Brandeis University
Lisa Weinberg, Florida State University
Elaine Weiner, McGill University

Debra Welkley, California State University, Sacramento
Alan Wight, University of Cincinnati
Brenda Wilhelm, Colorado Mesa University
Sarah Winslow, Clemson University
Gilbert Zicklin, Montclair State University

In the category of people just doing their jobs, but in ways that helped me get through the day, finish the chapter, or solve a problem, I thank the workers at Weaver St. Market in Chapel Hill, the librarians and other staff at the University of North Carolina's Population Center, and the staff in the sociology departments at UNC and the University of Maryland.

Since I started this project I lost two great teachers, and inspirational sociologists, who I knew from my days in graduate school: Harriet Presser, a professor at Maryland when I arrived, taught my Gender, Work, and Family seminar (which I now teach); and Suzanne Bianchi, who was a teacher, collaborator, and mentor. I so wanted them to see this book completed, but I was lucky to work with them while I could; I hope they would be proud.

Looking back at these lists, I am amazed at how this project enriched the web of social and intellectual interaction within which I work. As you, teachers and students whom I don't yet know, pick up this book, I hope you will help this conversation continue.

Additional Resources

For Students

FamilyInequality.com
The author's regularly updated blog shows students how what they learn about modern families applies to what's going on in the world around them.

"Story Behind the Numbers"
These online animations are perfect for teaching online or in the classroom and will be available on Norton's YouTube channel as well as in the enhanced ebook and Coursepack.

Ebooks
Same great book, a fraction of the price.

Norton ebooks let students access the entire book and much more: they can search, highlight, and take notes with ease. *The Family* ebook allows students to collaborate and share their notes with teachers and classmates. And the ebook can be viewed on any device—laptop, tablet, phone—even a public computer, and will stay synced between devices.

For Instructors

Everything you need for your course is available at wwnorton.com/instructors

Coursepack

By Heather Laube of University of Michigan, Flint; Jessica Hardie of Hunter College-CUNY; and Rosemary Russo of University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

The Family's Coursepack offers a variety of activities, and assessment and review materials for instructors who use Blackboard and other learning management systems. The Coursepack includes an optional ebook and features:

- A pre-reading quiz for each chapter
- Glossary flashcards and gradable glossary matching exercises
- A chapter review quiz for each chapter with a variety of common LMS question types, including multiple-choice, ranking/ordering, and matching questions
- Gradable exercises on the online "Story Behind the Numbers" animations
- Online versions of the workshops
- A "Writing About Sociology" section that includes practice activities and assessments
- *Sociology in Practice: Thinking about the Family* DVD activities that include multiple-choice assessments that connect each clip to key sociological concepts
- Gradable activities based on FamilyInequality.com blog posts

Formats:

- Blackboard
- Angel
- Canvas
- D2L
- Moodle

Sociology in Practice: Thinking about the Family DVD

Curated by Karen Sternheimer, University of Southern California

Containing more than two hours of video clips drawn from documentaries by independent filmmakers, the DVD clips are ideal for initiating classroom discussion and encouraging students to apply sociological concepts to popular and real-world issues. The clips are also offered in streaming versions in the Coursepack. Each streamed clip is accompanied by a quiz, short-answer exercise, or discussion question.

Lecture PowerPoints

By Laura MacIntyre of University of Michigan, Flint

These lecture PowerPoint slides feature bulleted classroom lecture notes in the notes field that will be particularly helpful to first-time teachers.

Art PowerPoints and JPGs

All of the art from the book, sized for classroom display.

Test Bank

By Sarah Gaby of Unviersity of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Dawn Hall of Sinclair Community College; Amy Scott of Sinclair Community College; Sharon Wiederstein of Blinn College; and Kimberly P. Brackett of Auburn University at Montgomery

The Test Bank for *The Family* is designed to help instructors prepare exams. In addition to Bloom's taxonomy, each question is tagged with metadata that places it in the context of the chapter, as well as difficulty level, making it easy to construct tests.

Instructor's Manual

By Rebecca Feiler-White of Ocean County College and Claudia Geist of University of Utah

The instructor's manual assists lesson development with suggestions for in-class discussion and group work, writing assignments and projects, and workshops that encourage students to practice sociology. It is available for download in PDF and Word at http://books.wwnorton.com/books/instructor-resources/.

The Family

1 A Sociology of the Family

Americans have a long-standing interest in **genealogy**—the study of ancestry and family history—looking back through the generations for a feeling of connection to a larger family tree. They may search for links to early colonial settlers or immigrants, try to unearth the painful past of slavery among their ancestors, or maybe gain a piece of a long-lost family fortune. Traditionally, this involved research into family archives and public libraries, but recently such sleuths are using genetic tests to trace their family trees. Even when the link is literally microscopic, it can establish family ties across formidable social barriers. That was the case for Vy Higginsen, a Black woman who runs a Harlem school for gospel singers, and Marion West, a White cattle rancher from Missouri. The two discovered through DNA testing that they shared a distant common ancestor and celebrated their discovery at a reunion in Harlem. West, whose grandfather fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War, addressed his newfound Black family members, saying, "Dear God, thank you for this beautiful night and this great family we got here" (Kilgannon 2007:E3).

genealogy

The study of ancestry and family history.

The promise of a genetic connection is also how a 63-year-old woman named Derrell Teat ended up following a suspected descendant of her great-great-great-grandfather's brother to a local McDonald's, hoping to secure a piece of castaway DNA after he refused to give her a sample voluntarily. "I was going to take his coffee cup out of the garbage can," Teat said. "I was willing to do whatever it took" (Harmon 2007:A1). In both cases, the family connection was symbolic; the connection West, Higginsen, and Teat shared was meaningful to them because they believed that it was.

Through DNA testing, Vy Higginsen (left) and Marion West (right) discovered they shared a distant common ancestor.

To see how far you can take this symbolic form of family, consider the owners of virtual family members:

- A robot dog product called AIBO won the hearts of many consumers when it was introduced in 1999. "I don't think of her as a toy anymore," said one 36-year-old mother of two. "She's like part of the family. . . . It's so strange. You become attached" (Kahney 2001).

- For homebound elderly people, a company called GeriJoy sells a "virtual elder companion," a talking-dog iPad app, which interacts with its companion 24/7 under the direction of remote staff. Because the GeriJoy looks and speaks the same way even when it's operated by different staff members, clients can develop a personal relationship with it over time.

- Of course, in a country where more households have a dog (46 percent) than have children (32 percent), animals are an important part of family life, and they are often treated as family members (U.S. Census Bureau 2012a; Humane Society 2013). On the Internet, for example, Americans have posted thousands of photographs showing off their "grandpuppies," referring not to the offspring of their dogs but to the dogs of their human children.

These examples of the many ways people establish family connections or develop relations that mimic families help illustrate the commonplace reality that our families are what we think they are.

Defining Families

We usually know what we mean—and whom we mean—when we use the word *family*. The clearest family connections are biological, as between parents and their children. Legal recognition binds people into families in the case of marriage or adoption. And emotional connections often rise to the level of family as well, as when people use the term "auntie" to refer to family friends who are not related by blood or marriage. In the simplest definition, then, **families** are groups of related people, bound by connections that are biological, legal, or emotional. As we will see, however, not everyone agrees about which biological, legal, and emotional connections create families.

families

Groups of related people, bound by connections that are biological, legal, or emotional.

Some family reunions are big enough to fill a city park pavilion, and few of those people know how everyone is related. But that is not the universal modern experience. For every sprawling family that includes hundreds of living relatives—distant cousins, stepfamilies, and in-laws—there are many others living as insular units of only a few people, either by choice or as a result of family dissolution, death, or isolation. Out of 235 million adults in the United States, almost 54 million live alone or only with people to whom they are not related (U.S. Census Bureau 2012a).

Some people have families large enough to have reunions in city parks, while others live alone. Almost a quarter of American adults live alone or with people to whom they are not related.

Usually, the label *family* signals an expectation of care or commitment, which is partly how we know who counts as a member of the family. That's why some people refer informally to a cherished babysitter as "part of the family." Family relationships are the basis for a wide range of social obligations, both formal and informal. For example, an illness or death in the family is usually accepted as an excuse for missing work or class (with no proof of a blood relationship required). People are expected to sacrifice their personal time, energy, and money for the well-being of their family members. That means waking up at night for a crying baby and spending your own money to send your kids to college (that's why college financial aid is affected by how rich or poor a student's parents are). But caring is also the law, and failing to care for a family member—for example, by abandoning a child—may be a criminal offense. That differs from caring for members of society at large, a function that in the United States is mostly delegated to government and religious or charitable organizations.

If family relations imply caring, they also carry with them lines of authority. Challenging such authority can have unpleasant or even dangerous consequences. In the United States, many parents (or other caregivers) use moderate physical force against their children for discipline, and this is usually tolerated as a reasonable exercise of family authority. In fact, by the time they reach fifth grade, 80 percent of American children have been physically punished by their parents (Gershoff and Bitensky 2007). Parents don't apply for a permit to spank their children; their discipline is informally approved based on common cultural understandings of family boundaries and relationships. Nonfamily authorities such as the police or social welfare agencies can also discipline children, but only with legal permission, and generally not with violence (an exception is corporal punishment in some schools, where teachers and administrators are seen as extensions of parental authority). Thus, family authority is recognized both informally by common practice and formally by the law.

Biological or not biological, formal or informal—clearly, we don't all agree on a single definition of families. And rather than insist on conformity on the issue,

I find it helpful to think of several types of definition: the personal family, the legal family, and the family as an institutional arena. Each of these conceptions is useful for different circumstances, and together they identify the subject matter of this book—the sociological approach to families. *Sociology* is an academic discipline that studies the nature and development of human society, in our case specifically the family. Often, that means looking at the same phenomenon from different angles, as we do with defining families.

The Personal Family

personal family

The people to whom we feel related and who we expect to define us as members of their family as well.

Any attempt to create a single definition of *family* from all the different ways people use the term runs the risk of being overly vague. For that reason, I define the **personal family** simply as the people to whom we feel related and who we expect to define us as members of their family as well. By this definition, a group of people who mutually define themselves as a family are a family, based on their own understanding of the concept *related*. Whom people choose to include in these groups changes from time to time and differs from place to place. Thus, over time it has gradually become acceptable to consider stepchildren and stepparents as bona fide members of the same family (see the discussion of *blended families* in Chapter 10). Because definitions of personal families follow common patterns, they are partly a product of the larger culture in which we live. In China, for example, some girls are informally adopted by families that do not have daughters and that may be prevented from having additional children under the country's restrictive fertility laws, and this is culturally consistent with ancient practices of informal adoption in that country. So even if our family choices seem highly personal, they reflect the interaction of our own decisions with all the influences we face and the practices of those around us.

Hannah Rocklein was adopted as a toddler from a Russian orphanage. Her adoptive parents later divorced. She now lives with her adoptive mother and siblings, stepfather, and dog.

As you can see, this definition is quite vague, but a more specific definition inevitably would exclude families as many people see them. In fact, most of us learn to recognize members of our own family before we are old enough to understand how the term *family* is defined. This personal family as we experience it in our daily lives sets the boundaries for our most intimate interactions from an early age.

According to child psychologists, understanding the difference between family members and others is an important part of our development in early childhood. Young children who cannot "exhibit appropriate selective attachments" or who show "excessive familiarity with

relative strangers" may be diagnosed with a psychological disorder that is usually associated with inadequate emotional or physical care (American Psychiatric Association 2000). Lack of family definition also causes many of the tensions in newly formed stepfamilies, which have difficulty establishing clear boundaries around units within the family or between the family and the outside world (Braithwaite et al. 2001). In short, defining our families is an important step in the construction of our personal identities, and the personal family is the definition we apply in that process.

The Legal Family

Most people don't judge the definitions others apply to their own families. We don't ask for proof that a student was emotionally close to her deceased grandfather before giving her permission to miss class for the funeral—that relationship is assumed. Increasingly, however, as families have become more diverse in their structure and as public rights and obligations have been tied to family relationships, the government's definition of families has grown more complicated. It also has taken on greater social and political importance. There is no universal legal definition, but the **legal family** is generally defined as a group of individuals related by birth, marriage, or adoption. This appears to be a straightforward definition, but in law the meaning of almost every word may be contested and subject to change.

legal family

A group of individuals related by birth, marriage, or adoption.

The most contentious term in this definition is *marriage*, which carries with it many rights and responsibilities overseen by the government. In fact, most debates over the definition of *family* in recent years have had to do with what marriage is (Powell et al. 2010). In 1996, when it first appeared that some states might start granting marriage licenses to same-sex couples, the U.S. Congress overwhelmingly passed, and President Bill Clinton signed, the Defense of Marriage Act. The law specified that the federal government would not recognize same-sex married couples as "married," even if their marriages were legally recognized by their home states. As a result of a legal challenge, however, the Supreme Court ruled in *United States v. Windsor* (2013) that the federal government must recognize all marriages that are legally valid in the states, granting same-sex couples access to all federal benefits, from health coverage and Social Security pensions to the right to be buried in veterans' cemeteries with their spouses. (We will return to this issue in Chapter 8.)

Such official definitions clearly have implications for the distribution of limited resources. For example, until the *Windsor* decision, a same-sex couple married in Massachusetts, with one citizen and one immigrant spouse, could not use that marriage to gain citizenship for the immigrant spouse (J. Preston 2013). But many other aspects of life are affected as well. When New York State announced in 2008 that it would officially recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states, the decision affected some 1,300 statutes and regulations, "governing everything from joint filing of income tax returns to transferring

While the Supreme Court justices heard oral arguments in *United States v. Windsor*, crowds of activists from both sides of the debate gathered in front of the building.

fishing licenses between spouses" (Peters 2008:A1). The government's definition also lends credibility—or legitimacy—to some families and contributes to a sense of isolation or exclusion for those whose families do not conform.

In some cases, a legal definition of family relationships is enforced nationally, as in the federal tax code, immigration rules, or Social Security and the Medicare health insurance program. But usually the states apply and enforce their own laws regulating family life. Local legal definitions underlie many conflicts, ranging from adoption (who can adopt?) to residential zoning (how many "unrelated" people can live in one household?). Further, because the laws contribute to our personal definitions, and because legal definitions are inherently subject to political debate, they have gained symbolic importance—which may explain why so many people care how other people define their families. Even though local laws and definitions vary, the U.S. Census Bureau, which gathers much of the data on American families that we will examine in this book, uses the federal government's definition of the legal family (see Changing Law, "How the U.S. Census Counts Families").

The Family as an Institutional Arena

Individuals define their own families. The state imposes a legal definition of families—"state" used in this way refers to the government at all levels. What about sociology? I can't tell you that sociology resolves the different or conflicting definitions of a family. But by stepping back and thinking analytically, we may be able to usefully frame the way families are defined. To do that requires

How the U.S. Census Counts Families

The history of the U.S. Census offers important lessons about the definition of families. It also serves as an example of the emergence of individuality in modern society and the "institutionalized individuality" referred to by the modernity theorists studied later in this chapter (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2004).

The U.S. Constitution in 1789 ordered an "actual enumeration" of the population every 10 years, for purposes of apportioning political representatives among the population. A nationwide **census** has been carried out every 10 years since 1790. But the idea of counting everyone in the population is at least as old as the story of the Jews wandering in the desert after fleeing Egypt, in which God commanded Moses to "take the sum of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by families following their fathers' houses; a head count of every male according to the number of their names."

census

A periodic count of people in a population and their characteristics, usually performed as an official government function.

In all modern societies, the census plays a crucial role in the development of public infrastructure and the administration of services. These data collection efforts are large government projects, conducted at great expense: the 2010 U.S. Census cost more than $13 billion and employed more than a million people. The census also is one of the government's direct interventions into personal life, requiring the formal definition of all individuals' relationships and family boundaries. So the definitions that government officials use are important for how commonly accepted roles and identities are developed (Coontz 2010).

Until 1840, the U.S. Census recorded only the name of the "head" of each household, with an anonymous count of other people present (slaves were counted as members of their owners' families, though they only counted as three-fifths of a person for purposes of congressional representation). Starting in 1840, individuals were recorded separately, though still listed by household, under the "family head." At that time, census forms were filled out by enumerators, who knocked on doors and recorded information by hand. In 1870, confronted for the first time with large urban buildings that did not separate families into distinct households, the census defined a **household** as a group of people who share a common dining table. That idea stuck, and some variation of the concept of "live and eat separately from others" has been used to define households ever since (Ruggles and Brower 2003).

household

A group of people that lives and eats separately from other groups.

What Is a Census Family?

Today, the Census Bureau uses the legal definition of the family presented in this chapter, but with one qualification: a family lives together in one household. By the personal or legal