The Family

Second Edition

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 variety of virtual family members:

- People who have received transplanted organs from dying patients are increasingly becoming involved in the lives of their donors' families. For example, when Jeni Stepien married Paul Maenner, her father wasn't available to walk her down the aisle, because he had been murdered 10 years earlier. But the man who received her father's transplanted heart was there to do the honor. Arthur Thomas, whom the Stepien family had never met before the transplant, carried "a physical piece of my father" down the aisle with her, Stepien said—his new heart. And the wedding photographer snapped a picture of her placing her hand on his chest during the ceremony (Rogers 2016).

- For homebound elderly people, or those living in institutions, a company called GeriJoy sells a virtual "caregiving companion" service, in which a talking pet appears on an iPad app, interacting with its companion 24/7 under the direction of remote staff (who may be on another continent). The companion asks questions about relatives and flips through old family photos. And 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 (44 percent) than have children (31 percent), animals are an important part of family life, and they are often treated as family members (U.S. Census Bureau 2015a, Table H2; Humane Society 2016). 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 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.

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 242 million adults in the United States, 53 million live alone or only with people to whom they are not related (U.S. Census Bureau 2015a: Tables A1 & H2).

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—which is why college financial aid is affected by how rich or poor a student's parents are (Goldrick-Rab 2016). 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; almost half of parents say they at least sometimes spank their children (Pew Research Center 2015a). 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.

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.

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.

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. 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. Then, in the 2015 decision known as *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the Court went further, finally guaranteeing same-sex couples the right to marriage in every state. (We will return to this issue in Chapter 8.)

In 2015 the Supreme Court made same-sex marriage legal in every state, helping to change the definition of *family*.

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. In New York State, for example, the official recognition of same-sex marriage affected some 1,300 statutes and regulations, "governing everything from joint filing of income tax returns to transferring 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").

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. Even with use of online forms and mobile technology, the 2020 U.S. Census is projected to cost more than $13 billion and employ hundreds of thousands of workers visiting American households. 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

definitions I presented earlier, members of the same family could live in different households. In fact, one person could be a member of any number of families. When it comes to collecting statistical data, however, that is not practical. So the Census Bureau limits each family to one household, and each person can only be counted in one place. That is why students living in college dorms are not counted as part of their families' households (which is also the case for military personnel abroad or on ships, prisoners, or people in nursing homes). With this definition—putting each person in only one household—the 2010 census showed that among the 301 million people living in 117 million households, there were 78 million families, or groups of people related by birth, marriage, or adoption who live together in one household (U.S. Census 2012a).

But how does the Census Bureau apply the legal definition of family? The task seemed simple at first. The 1880 census was the first to record information about each individual's relationship within the family. After listing the "head" of each family (always the husband in the case of married couples), the enumerator made a list of all other individuals in the household and made a note of the "relationship of each person to the head of this family—whether wife, son, daughter, servant, boarder, or other" (Ruggles et al. 2013). Those six categories now serve as a quaint reminder of a simpler time in family life.

Starting in the 1960s, as families became more complicated, the categories on the census form proliferated, and now people usually fill out the forms without assistance, choosing the category for each person in the household themselves. The idea of a "household head" came under attack from feminists in the 1960s, because they didn't like the presumption of male authority that it implied (Presser 1998). That pressure was successful, and by 1980, the census form dropped the category "household head" and now simply refers to a "householder," defined as anyone who legally owns or rents the home. That was one of many changes that followed. Figure 1.1 shows the relationship categories planned for the 2020 census, now including no fewer than 16 ways people can be associated with "Person 1," the householder.

Figure 1.1 **"Relationship" question planned for the 2020 Census**

How is this person related to Person 1? *Mark (X) ONE box.*

☐ Opposite-sex husband/wife/spouse	☐ Father or mother
☐ Opposite-sex unmarried partner	☐ Grandchild
☐ Same-sex husband/wife/spouse	☐ Parent-in-law
☐ Same-sex unmarried partner	☐ Son-in-law or daughter-in-law
☐ Biological son or daughter	☐ Other relative
☐ Adopted son or daughter	☐ Housemate or roommate
☐ Stepson or stepdaughter	☐ Foster child
☐ Brother or sister	☐ Other nonrelative

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau (2016a).

The historical concept of a "man and his family" has clearly been supplanted with a long list of individual relationships and identities. The most important recent change to this list is asking couples directly whether they are same-sex or opposite-sex, a question the Census Bureau did not ask before same-sex marriage became legal nationally in 2015. They further ask couples to identify whether they are married or "unmarried partners." Biological children are differentiated from adopted children, stepchildren, and foster children. In-laws and grandchildren are identified separately. You might notice another subtle distinction from the list in Figure 1.1. The categories "other relative" and "other nonrelative" appear toward the end. Although these are not defined on the form, their placement implies that the last two—housemate/roommate and foster child—are nonrelatives, while the rest are relatives. In fact, however, official statistics on families do not (yet) include those listed as unmarried partners as family members, even though many people in such relationships obviously think of themselves as being part of the same family. When society changes rapidly—as it is now with regard to family relationships—then laws, government policies, and cultural attitudes often contradict each other, which can provoke feelings of insecurity or conflict.

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 the use of some terms and ideas that may seem abstract. But I hope that once we get over the hurdle of these abstractions, you will find that they help make your understanding of families more concrete.

Rather than identify certain groups of people as families or not, this sociological definition conceives of the family as the place where family matters take place. I will refer to that as an **institutional arena**, a social space in which relations between people in common positions are governed by accepted rules of interaction. In the family arena, for example, there are positions that people occupy (for example, father, mother, child, brother, sister). And there are rules of interaction, most of them informal, that govern how people in these positions interact. When a social position is accompanied by accepted patterns of behavior, it becomes a role. Family rules include obligations as well as privileges. For example, parents must feed, clothe, socialize, and otherwise care for their children in the most intimate ways. And children are usually expected to obey their parents. The **family arena**, then, is the institutional arena where people practice intimacy, childbearing and socialization, and caring work. Not everyone fits perfectly into these positions or follows these rules, but when they do not

institutional arena

A social space in which relations between people in common positions are governed by accepted rules of interaction.

family arena

The institutional arena where people practice intimacy, childbearing and socialization, and caring work.

conform—for example, when parents abuse or neglect their children—it only serves to reinforce the importance of the rules (Martin 2004).

An institutional arena is not a physical space with a clear boundary, like a sports arena, but a social place where a set of interactions play out. If you think of a game like soccer, there may be an ideal place to play it—a soccer field—but you can sort of play it anywhere. The rules are a little bit different here and there, and many of them are informal. You don't need lines on the ground or fixed goals. A great example of this is the common practice of widening or narrowing the space between the goal posts according to how many players are on the field. In the same way, the family is not a specific social arrangement or something that happens in one home or one type of home. Its rules and positions evolve over time and take place in the area of social interaction where intimacy, childbearing and socialization, and caring work are enacted.

These aspects of family life consume much of our personal, social, and economic energy and passions. But they do not encompass the domains of two other important institutional arenas that have direct interactions with the family: the state and the market. To understand the family's place in the society overall, we need to define these overlapping arenas.

state

The institutional arena where, through political means, behavior is legally regulated, violence is controlled, and resources are redistributed.

The **state** includes many different organizations filled with people in many roles. But at its core, the state is the institutional arena where, through political means, behavior is legally regulated, violence is controlled, and resources are redistributed. The regulation of behavior is set out in laws and policies, and these are enforced with the threat or use of violence (from family court to the prison system to the armed forces). The state affects families directly through regulation, such as granting marriage licenses and facilitating divorces, and by redistributing resources according to family relationships. Redistribution takes place by taxing families and individuals and then spending tax money on education, health care, Social Security, welfare, and other programs.

market

The institutional arena where labor for pay, economic exchange, and wealth accumulation take place.

The state also regulates the behavior of economic organizations and collects taxes and fees from them. In that way, the state has direct interactions with our third institutional arena, the **market**, which is the institutional arena where labor for pay, economic exchange, and wealth accumulation take place. All these activities are closely related to family life. For example, when parents decide whether to work for pay or stay home with their kids, they have to consider the jobs they can get and the costs of day care and other services. These decisions then affect family relationships and future decisions, such as how to divide labor within the family, how many children to have, whether to pursue advanced education—and maybe even whether to get divorced.

The key features of these three institutional arenas are shown in Table 1.1. Each arena signifies a certain type of social interaction, each is composed of organizational units, and each specifies certain roles for its members. Clearly, most people have roles in all of these arenas and take part in different organizational units. For example, a parent might care for his or her own children at home but also work as a nurse or day care provider in the market arena and act as a citizen on political questions, such as whether welfare programs should use tax money to pay for poor people's day care services. One way to look at such overlapping roles is to see them as interactions between the institutional arenas.

Table 1.1 **Modern institutional arenas**

	STATE	MARKET	FAMILY
TYPE OF INTERACTION	Law, violence, and welfare	Labor, exchange, and wealth accumulation	Intimacy, childbearing and socialization, and caring work
ORGANIZATIONAL UNITS	Legislatures and agencies	Companies	Families
INDIVIDUAL ROLES	Citizens	Workers, owners, and consumers	Family members

The interaction of institutional arenas is illustrated in the Story Behind the Numbers, which shows examples of overlapping roles. We can see the interaction of family and state arenas in the state licensing of marriages, and the interaction of family and market arenas in the role that commercial services such as day care providers make available to families. An additional interaction (not shown) is between state and market arenas, as when the state regulates the market by restricting companies' behavior. For example, under the Family and Medical Leave Act, the federal government requires large companies to give most of their workers (unpaid) time off from work when a child or another family member is sick. Finally, the figure illustrates one area where all three arenas clearly overlap: welfare policy. As we will see, state support of the poor is based on certain conceptions of family relationships (thus regulating family life), and market forces affect the ability of families to support themselves with or without welfare—even as family decisions affect the market arena (such as poor single mothers entering the labor force).

As we will see in Chapter 2, thinking about institutional arenas can help tell the history of the family. For example, Andrew Cherlin has argued that the growth of individual choice in family relationships signifies a weakening of marriage as an institution as its rules become more flexible (Cherlin 2004). Family history is also a story of changes in how different arenas interact. Returning to the example of parents punishing their children, the state intervenes when its authorities enforce laws against child abuse or acts of violence. The history of change in these two arenas is partly the story of how the line between parental and state authority has been drawn. The state's role also has evolved in the growth of public services in health care and education and in the changing state definitions of marriage, all of which alter the borders of the family arena and the roles of its members.

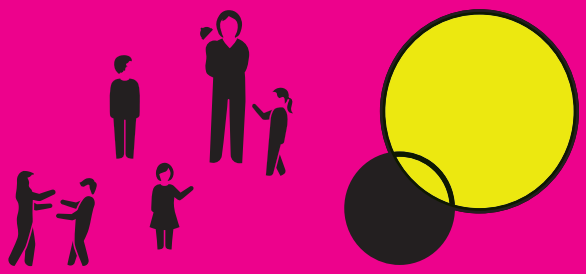
Throughout this book, we will use the idea of institutional arenas as a way to understand how larger forces interact with individuals and families to shape family life and how the family in turn contributes to larger social trends. Considering the relationship between individual experience and larger social forces is one of the main promises of sociology. And the family has been the subject of

The Story Behind the Numbers

The family is not an isolated entity.

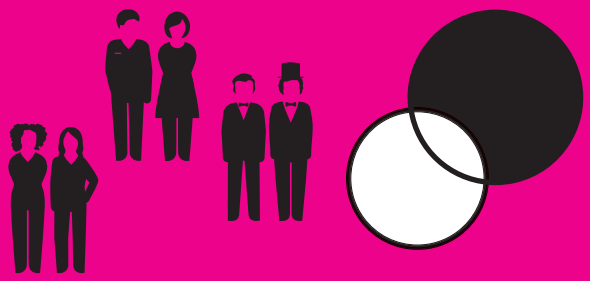
Day Care

The market makes available—or not—the child-care services many parents need for their children.



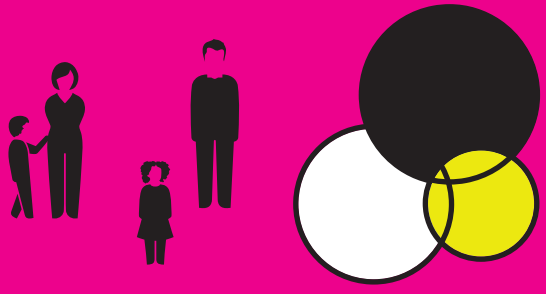
Marriage Licenses

The laws and regulations of the state determine who can and cannot get married.

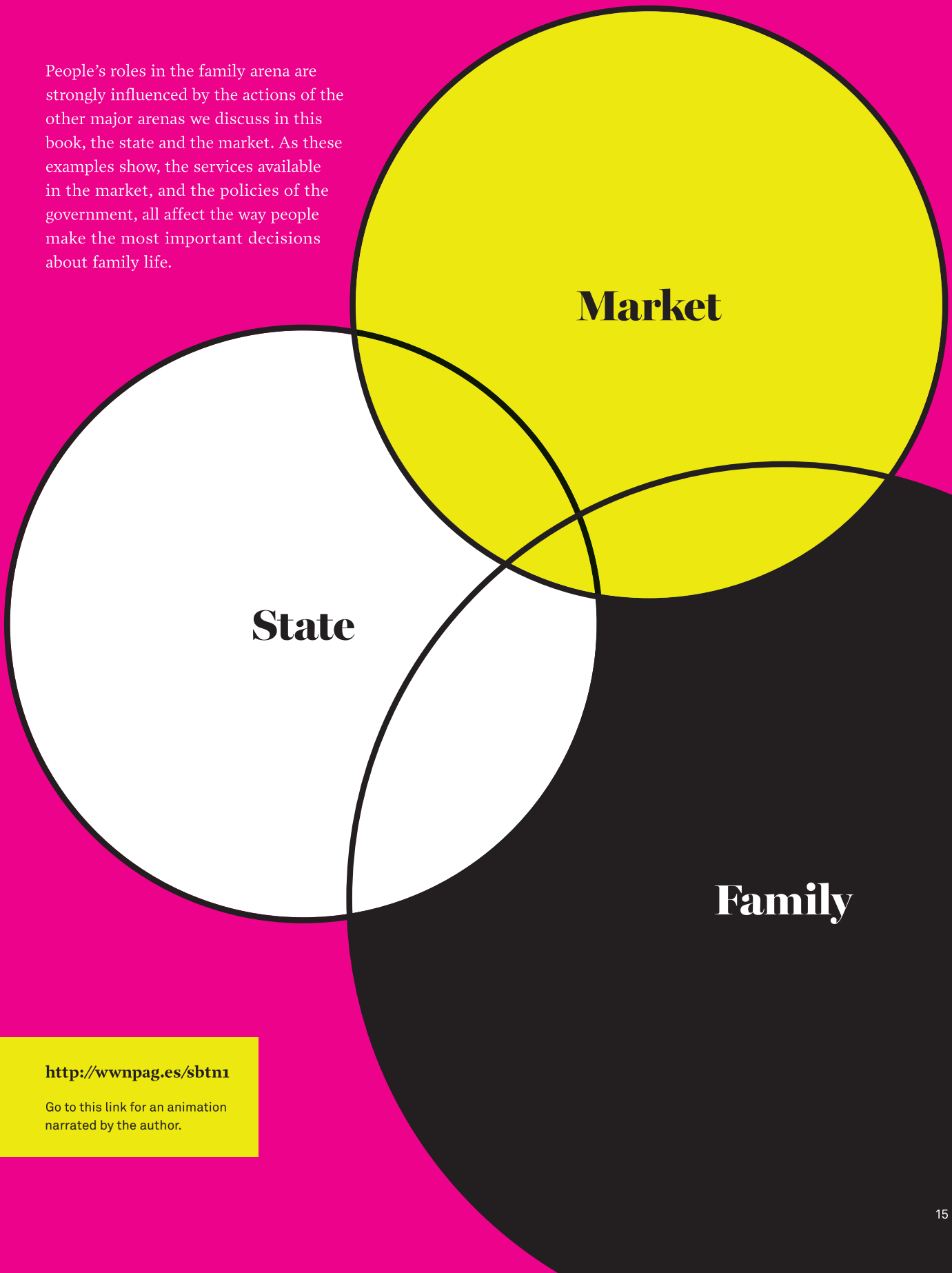


Welfare

All three arenas overlap in the welfare system, as poor families decide how to care for their children, with a mix of support from the government and income from their jobs.



People's roles in the family arena are strongly influenced by the actions of the other major arenas we discuss in this book, the state and the market. As these examples show, the services available in the market, and the policies of the government, all affect the way people make the most important decisions about family life.



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Go to this link for an animation narrated by the author.

sociological scrutiny throughout the history of the discipline. Therefore, before going further into the main subject of this book—the family as a diverse, changing feature of our unequal society—we will need to establish some additional theoretical background.

The Family in Sociological Theory

In this section, I present some prominent sociological theories and explain how they are useful in thinking about families and changes in family relationships. I want to emphasize that we are not necessarily marrying (to choose a metaphor) any one theory. Rather, we will consider a range of theories and perspectives that offer different kinds of explanations for the patterns we see. If we use theory to our advantage, we might be able to predict the future—or at least avoid being taken completely by surprise (Dilworth-Anderson, Burton, and Klein 2005).

In sociology, as in any other science, theory is a way to apply logic to a pattern of facts, to structure the way we think about our subject matter, and to help us generate ideas for research to enrich that understanding. Some factual descriptions of family life are widely known—for example, the modern tendency to leave home and live in a two-parent nuclear family after marriage, the growing practice of cohabitation outside of marriage, and the decline in the number of children per family in the last 100 years. (These and other historical trends will be discussed in Chapter 2.) But those are just facts, and there are different ways to make sense of them, to make them fit with our understanding of social life more broadly. That's where theory comes in.

Rather than choosing between theories, we may find that different theories work better to answer different types of questions. Some may seem more wrong or right than others, but most sociologists do not stick to any one theory, especially in family research (Taylor and Bagdi 2005). I will introduce two broad perspectives with deep historical roots—the consensus perspective and the conflict perspective—and tie them to the study of families. Then I will discuss several more recently developed theories to help us form a common understanding for the rest of the book.

Broad Perspectives

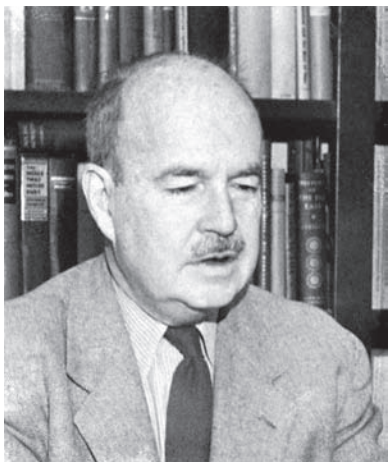
consensus perspective

A perspective that projects an image of society as the collective expression of shared norms and values.

Consensus The **consensus perspective** projects an image of society as the collective expression of shared norms and values (Ritzer 2000). This is an ancient view of society, with roots in Greek philosophy. It was also used to support democracy and the American Revolution, with the argument that society cannot

work without the consent of the governed (Horowitz 1962). That doesn't mean that everyone agrees on everything, but rather that society exists as the enactment of social order. It means that most of us voluntarily get up in the morning (or thereabouts) and play our roles each day, instead of making the infinite other choices available to us that would lead to general chaos. This does not imply that society never changes or that there are no conflicts, but it does mean that order is the core of social life and that social change works best when it takes place in an orderly fashion; chaotic or rapid change is to be avoided.

In the tradition of this perspective, the dominant sociological theory is known as *structural functionalism*, which has roots in the work of French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917). It became the dominant theory in American sociology around the middle of the twentieth century with the work of Talcott Parsons (1902–1979). Although few sociologists today identify as structural functionalists, key elements of the consensus perspective remain influential. Researchers adopting this perspective in general examine some common pattern of behavior and ask, "What are the functions of this? What good is it doing that permits it to survive?" The theory often assumes that there is a good reason for things to be the way they are and tries to explain them based on this premise. As a result, the consensus perspective tends to focus on stability rather than change, in keeping with its harmonious image of society.



Talcott Parsons

Examining American family life in the 1950s, when the dominant family structure was the **breadwinner-homemaker family** (an employed father, a nonemployed mother, and their children), Parsons mistakenly believed that major change was unlikely. That was good news to him, because he ardently believed that what he saw as the essence of families—the harmony created by the complementary roles of husband and wife—was essential to the preservation of the family as an institution (Parsons and Bales 1955). When Parsons looked at that family structure and asked himself why it worked, his answer was that it provided the basis for stability and cooperation. There was mutual compatibility between men and women, with each one performing a separate, necessary function. He called these functions *the instrumental role* of the husband and the *expressive role* of the wife. After studying different kinds of organizations (not just families), Parsons concluded that successful organizations had instrumental leadership that took charge of interaction with the outside world—for example, on questions of economics and trade. Balancing that was the expressive leadership necessary to provide emotional support, nurturing, and caring for the group (Parsons 1954). The division of labor within breadwinner-homemaker families, in which the husband works outside the home and the wife works inside the home, fit into Parsons's notion of a dichotomy between instrumental and expressive leadership. And maintaining this balance was essential to the success of the family as an institution.

breadwinner-homemaker family

An employed father, a nonemployed mother, and their children.

To critics, all this looked like a long-winded rationalization of the male-dominated status quo, serving a conservative political agenda. In fact, the whole consensus perspective has been criticized as something people in positions of power use to justify the social structure that exists at any given time or place (Ritzer 2000). There may be some truth to that; we all have our biases. However,

at its best, this theory helps us understand the nuclear family as a model and how it might work as an ideal.

conflict perspective

The view that opposition and conflict define a given society and are necessary for social evolution.

Conflict If structural functionalism starts from the premise that consensus and harmony form the basis of society, the **conflict perspective** takes the contrary view: opposition and conflict define a given society and are necessary for social evolution. Historically, this position has opposed the consensus perspective's tendency to portray the status quo as good and the forces of change as dangerously destabilizing. More specifically, in sociology this theory developed in reaction to the dominance of structural functionalism, suggesting that change, rather than stability, is the dynamic we need to explain. What came to be known as conflict theory drew on the work of Karl Marx (1818–1883; see Chapter 4) and others who believed that inequality and the conflict it causes are what drive history forward. In its moderate form, the theory argues simply that expressing conflict over differences is often the best way to arrive at positive changes in families, organizations, and society at large.

Conflict theorists focus on the competing interests of family members to understand family problems—for example, child abuse or divorce. Randall Collins, a leading writer in this field, believes that men use their greater strength to gain power in the family and achieve their own ends (R. Collins 1975). Some take a more expansive view of family conflict to describe the modern nuclear family as a tool for enhancing the profits of the rich at the expense of the poor. Connecting family inequality to Marx's theory of capitalism, they argue that the work that wives have historically done at home without pay—nurturing and caring, cooking and cleaning, raising the children, and so on—takes care of men, so employers don't have to pay them as much. In turn, husbands maintain domination within the family and provide stability to the system (Zaretsky 1976). Rather than see the different roles of men and women as harmonious and functional, conflict theorists see them as part of an unstable system ripe for conflict and change.

If structural functionalism can be faulted for projecting an overly rosy view of family relations, conflict theory may suffer from the reverse: an emphasis on opposition and power struggles to the exclusion of the many ways that family members truly love and care for each other. In fact, neither theory can explain everything, but both may be useful for understanding some elements of family life.

Contemporary Theories

The debate between structural functionalism and conflict theory raged in the middle of the twentieth century, when the breadwinner-homemaker family was the norm in the United States. It is no coincidence that the emergence of a new group of theories about the family coincided with the growing diversity of family life and the decline of the breadwinner-homemaker model. We turn next to these more recent developments.

Feminism Feminism is part of the conflict perspective tradition, and feminists share many views with conflict theorists, especially a critical attitude about the breadwinner-homemaker model of family life. **Feminist theory** in general seeks to understand and ultimately reduce inequality between men and women. When it comes to the family, in particular, feminist theory sees "male dominance within families [as] part of a wider system of male power, [which] is neither natural nor inevitable, and occurs at women's cost" (Ferree 1990:866). The theory has a long history and many varieties; rather than explaining them all here, I will point out several recent contributions that have been most helpful to the study of the family (Baca Zinn 2000).

feminist theory

A theory that seeks to understand and ultimately reduce inequality between men and women.

First, beginning in the 1970s, feminist researchers demonstrated that gender inequality is central to family life (see Chapter 5). In fact, one reason many of these researchers were reluctant to speak of "the family" is because the experiences of men and women (or boys and girls) may be so different. Feminists showed that if the family arena is where boys and girls learn to be boys and girls (and men and women), it is also where those gender roles are created unequal, with men in the dominant position, through the process of **socialization** (see Chapter 5). However, family dynamics also are important for how gender affects other institutional arenas, and the family is only one site of gender inequality. For example, as we will see in Chapter 11, one reason women earn less at paid work (in the market arena) is because their careers are more likely to be hampered by unpaid care work obligations within the family.

socialization

The process by which individuals internalize elements of the social structure in their own personalities.

Second, feminist scholars have argued that family structure is socially constructed—the product of human choices rather than the inevitable outcome of natural or biological processes. Structural functionalists in particular

Drew Skinner's wife works long hours while he takes care of their young son. A small but increasing number of stay-at-home dads make it possible for their wives to remain in demanding jobs.

believed that the nuclear family is an expression of universal human tendencies; hence, nontraditional family structures are likely to be ineffective or unstable. To counter that view, feminists conducted comparative research (studying different cultures and time periods) to show the wide variety of family structures that have proved successful.

Later feminist theorists added a third important contribution. Just as early research had shown that the experience of family life differs dramatically for men and women, a subsequent generation argued that those gender perspectives are themselves not uniform. In particular, race, ethnicity, and social class all affect family life and gender dynamics in unique ways (see Chapters 3 and 4). For example, early feminists criticized the breadwinner-homemaker family as a structure in which men dominate women. But some contemporary feminists believe that in poor and minority communities, traditional family arrangements may be expressions of collective strength and resilience in the face of hardship, uniting men and women with a common purpose (Hill 2005). Together, these insights and findings from feminist scholars have contributed greatly to the work of family researchers, even those who do not share feminism's activist goal of reducing gender inequality.

Exchange Conflict perspective and feminism tend to treat different roles within the family as reflecting unequal power, especially men's domination over women. On the other hand, the consensus perspective offers a more harmonious account of why men and women stay in families together despite their differences. Similarly, **exchange theory** sees individuals or groups with different resources, strengths, and weaknesses entering into mutual relationships to maximize their own gains. In this view, individuals are rational; that is, they consider the costs and benefits of their actions in making their decisions. When they cannot satisfy all of their needs on their own (and they rarely can), people enter into exchange relationships with others. As long as the relationship is rewarding, both sides stay engaged. If the exchange is not rewarding, and if the cost of leaving is not too great, either party may leave (Dilworth-Anderson, Burton, and Klein 2005). This theory is part of the consensus tradition because it assumes that patterns of social behavior are mutually agreed on.

exchange theory

The theory that individuals or groups with different resources, strengths, and weaknesses enter into mutual relationships to maximize their own gains.

These ideas are closely related to a model of the family proposed by the Nobel prize–winning economist Gary Becker, in which husbands and wives make joint decisions to maximize benefits that all family members share—for example, sending men into the paid labor force while women care for the children at home (Becker 1981). Many sociologists find that theory naive, because it seems to assume equality between men and women and harmony between their interests. Do men and women in families really make decisions and share rewards equally, and do they want the same outcomes for their families? Sociologists do not rule out the logic of exchange in family relationships. But rather than assume equality, they prefer to think of the exchange as a bargaining process in which individuals strike the best bargain they can, given the resources they have and the rules they have to play by. When the resources are unequal, as they usually are, the bargains struck reflect that inequality. In this way, exchange theory can

become part of the conflict perspective—viewing exchange as a process by which people act out their competing interests.

The division of housework between men and women is a common subject of research for exchange theorists. This is a classic example of bargaining relationships negotiated under conditions of inequality. Because of men's greater earning power, they hold a stronger bargaining position at the start of the relationship. Because women usually earn less money than men, they may accept an arrangement in which they are the weaker party and so take on the more onerous and time-consuming household tasks, such as scrubbing toilets and doing laundry. Not surprisingly, we usually find that couples share housework more equally when the individual incomes of both partners are more equal (Bittman et al. 2003). Of course, economic resources are not the only subjects of the negotiation; couples may also bargain over sex, children, friends, and so on (we will discuss some of these complexities in Chapter 11).

Symbolic Interaction Starting in the early twentieth century, some sociologists embraced the idea that we can understand what things mean to people only by studying their behavior. So actions, not words, provide the true basis for meaning, and meaning can only be understood by studying its relationship to action. The theory they developed, which came to be called **symbolic interactionism,** revolves around the ability of humans to see themselves through the eyes of others and to enact social roles based on others' expectations. The theory gets its name from the idea that social roles are symbols, which have real meaning only when they are acted out in relation to other people (interaction). People may adopt many social roles—for example, president, nurse, football player, husband, or pedestrian. But it is the act of performing a given role in

symbolic interactionism

A theory concerned with the ability of humans to see themselves through the eyes of others and to enact social roles based on others' expectations.

Steph Curry inhabits multiple social roles, including husband, father, and Golden State Warrior.

relation to others that gives it meaning. Human self-identity is formed through that action and from the reactions to our behavior that we expect and observe in everyone else (Ritzer 2000).

Defining, identifying, and acting on a social role requires a delicate give and take at the interpersonal level as people assess the effects of their actions on others and the expectations that others have. The intimate nature of this process makes the family an ideal setting for developing this theory. Because social roles do not exist in isolation, but rather only in interaction, we need to observe behavior within the family to see how family roles are defined and what they mean (Stryker 1968).

This theory has been especially useful for studying social change, when roles and the informal rules that govern behavior are not clearly defined. For example, being a parent means different things for people who are married versus those who are single, and the role of husband or wife comes with different expectations for men and women who are employed versus those who are not (Macmillan and Copher 2005). As single parenthood and dual-earner couples have become more common, we can see the new meanings assigned to the roles of parent and spouse only by observing how they are acted out in the daily lives of the people who occupy them.

Modernity People often use the word *modern* to mean "contemporary," but in this book we will use it to refer to a specific period in history, from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment to the present. **Modernity theory** is very broad, but with regard to the family, it concerns the emergence of the individual as an actor in society and how individuality changed personal and institutional relations. Consider the scheme in Table 1.1 as a modern phenomenon. In the state arena, the individual emerged as a citizen, with the right to vote defining that role. In the market arena, the individual emerged as a worker, earning a cash wage to be spent on anything he or she chooses. What about the family arena? Here the individual emerged as an independent actor making choices about family relations freely, based on personal tastes and interests. Individual choice in the family had existed before modernity (more for some than for others), but only in this era did it become institutionalized, or expected of everyone (Beck and Lau 2005).

modernity theory

A theory of the historical emergence of the individual as an actor in society and how individuality changed personal and institutional relations.

Modernity theorists break the modern era into two periods. In *first modernity*, up until the 1960s or so, there was gradual change in family behavior—for example, more divorce, a gradually increasing age at first marriage, fewer children in families, fewer people living in extended families (see Chapter 2), and more choice in spouse selection. These were only incremental changes, however. Even though people exercised free choice, the concept of a "normal" family remained intact as a social standard. Different family types or pathways—such as marriage much later in life, having children outside of marriage, remarrying after divorce, or marrying outside your race—existed, but they were on the margins of acceptability. In *second modernity*, since the 1970s, the chickens have come home to roost. Diversity and individuality are the new norm, and it's up to each person to pick a family type and identify with it. Thus, freedom from traditional restraints "brings historically new free spaces and options: he can and should, she may

and must, now decide how to shape their own life" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2004:502). The growth of family diversity is a major theme of this book.

Acting individually is supported (or even required) by other institutions, especially the state and the market, which increasingly have treated people as individuals rather than as family members. This is only natural once family ties such as marriage are considered voluntary, subject to divorce by either individual. For example, some welfare and health care benefits and taxation involve transactions between individuals and the government (although some programs are still geared toward families). And most employers don't consider it necessary to pay a **family wage** to male workers with stay-at-home wives, as they did in the past (see Chapter 2). Compared with the premodern past, this "institutionalized individualization" leads to a tremendous fragmentation of family identities and puts a big psychological burden on people. As a result, a sense of insecurity spreads through the population, driving people into the arms of expert identity fixers, especially therapists and self-help gurus.

family wage

The amount necessary for a male earner to provide subsistence for his wife and children without them having to work for pay.

If all of this freedom implies individual isolation and lack of direction, it also stands to revolutionize the nature of intimacy and family relationships, at least according to modernity theorist Anthony Giddens. In his view, relationships now may be truly based on personal choice and individual fulfillment. Free from the constraints of traditional rules, free from the need to reproduce biologically, and free to negotiate economic survival as individuals, people may now enter into the ideal "pure relationship"—and leave when it suits them—for the first time in history (Giddens 1992).

Demography and the Life Course

Two additional perspectives warrant attention here, which supplement rather than compete with the theoretical views already presented. Many family researchers study the family in relation to larger population processes. If a population is the number of people in a certain area or place, it may be seen as (a) the number of children who have been born, (b) minus the number of people who have died, plus (c) the number of people who have arrived in the past (minus those who moved away). Demography—the study of populations—therefore focuses on birth, death, and migration. Family researchers who take a **demographic perspective** study family behavior and household structures that contribute to larger population processes. They are especially interested in childbirth, but to understand that, they must study the timing and frequency of cohabitation, marriage, and divorce, as well as living arrangements in general (who lives with whom at different stages in their lives).

demographic perspective

The study of how family behavior and household structures contribute to larger population processes.

The demographic emphasis on timing contributes to an interest in the sequencing of events for individuals and groups in the population. The "normal" family structure of the past included a progression from childhood to adulthood that included marriage and then parenthood. As family life has become more diverse, the common sequences of family events, or family trajectories, have become much more complicated. Researchers using the **life course perspective** study the family trajectories of individuals and groups as they progress through their lives. One important goal of this research is to place family events in their historical context (Elder 1975). For example, if you want to understand attitudes toward family life among Americans who were in their 50s in 2010, you might

life course perspective

The study of the family trajectories of individuals and groups as they progress through their lives, in social and historical context.

The decennial census in the United States is a massive project that requires more than a million people to complete. Many are census takers, or enumerators, who visit households that have not submitted a completed Census questionnaire.

cohort

A group of people who experience an event together at the same point in time.

consider their history as a **cohort**—a group of people who experience an event together at the same point in time (such as being born in the same period). These people were born in the 1950s, when birth rates were very high, so they grew up in a youth-dominated culture. They were in their teens in the late 1960s, when much of the popular culture first embraced ideas of free love and uncommitted romantic relationships. Divorce rates shot up when they were young adults in the 1970s, which had immediate and long-lasting effects on their attitudes toward cohabitation and divorce. Rather than examining individuals at fixed points in time, life course researchers seek to gain a deeper understanding by considering life stories in their social and historical context.

Studying Families

We have seen how sociologists use theories to make sense of the facts they discover. But where do these facts come from? More important, how can we build a knowledge base to help us understand the reasons behind the facts? In principle, sociologists may gain information from any source at all. However, there are common methods of gathering information that have proved successful. Before examining these sources of data, I need to briefly describe a few of the challenges encountered in studying families.

To develop deeper knowledge often requires using more information than we started out looking for. For example, we know that African Americans on

average are less likely to marry than Whites. However, to understand the reasons for that gap, we must look at a variety of factors, including not just individual preferences but also poverty and college attendance rates, income differences between men and women, and even incarceration and mortality rates. In other words, to understand the core facts requires knowledge of the context in which those facts occur.

How did researchers confuse causation and correlation in their study of night lights in bedrooms of nearsighted children?

Another issue we must contend with in research on families is the problem of telling the difference between correlation and cause. Many things are observed occurring together (correlation) without one causing the other. For example, a study of young children's vision found that those who had slept with the light on in their nurseries were more likely to be nearsighted. That is, light at night and nearsightedness appeared to be correlated (Quinn et al. 1999). The researchers suspected that light penetrating the eyelids during sleep harmed children's vision—that is, that light caused nearsightedness. However, a follow-up study determined that parents who are themselves nearsighted are more likely to leave a light on in their children's nurseries; it makes it easier for the parents to see. And since nearsightedness is partly genetic, it is possible that the nearsightedness of children who sleep with the light on results not from the light, but from the parents' nearsightedness being passed on to their children genetically (Zadnik 2000). In this case, despite the correlation of two facts, one did not cause the other. Researchers could only determine this by gathering contextual information about children's families.

Finally, although there are many sources of information, there are almost as many sources of **bias**—the tendency to impose previously held views on the collection and interpretation of facts. Consider an example: During the fall of 2016, the news for presidential candidate Donald Trump was not good: Polls from around the country showed he was very likely to lose the November election. One night the Fox News Network conducted an online poll of its viewers, asking them, "If the presidential election were held this week, who would win?" Despite the mountain of evidence to the contrary, the results showed that 86 percent of participants believed Trump would win. Because Fox favored Trump, and so did their loyal viewers, the poll produced a biased result—like an ice cream company asking children waiting in line at the ice cream truck what their favorite dessert is. Though that might be a good way to see how Trump supporters feel, it's not a good way to predict the winner of an election (even though it worked this time!).

bias

The tendency to impose previously held views on the collection and interpretation of facts.

We can't always eliminate bias, but we can increase accountability and transparency. That is why most sociologists prefer publicly funded studies, which make their data freely available and which in principle are repeatable by other researchers. That is, nothing is hidden about the way the information is collected and analyzed. And before results are accepted as reliable, a system of peer review is employed in which other scholars review the work anonymously,

checking for any sources of error, including bias, logical flaws, or simple mistakes in the analysis.

Sample Surveys

sample survey

A research method in which identical questions are asked of many different people and their answers gathered into one large data file.

The most common method of gathering data for sociological studies is the **sample survey**, in which identical questions are asked of many different people and their answers gathered into one large data file. By examining patterns among the responses to the questions we ask, we can find associations that help us understand family life. For example, if we ask people to tell us their gender and how often they do the dishes, we might find out if women do dishes more often than men.

Asking people for information about their lives and opinions is time-consuming and expensive, so we cannot study everyone. We need to find a method of choosing our study subjects. Consider a "quick vote" conducted by the CNN news channel, which asked the simple question, "Who does most of the chores in your household?" More than 30,000 people responded, and 60 percent of them chose "Mom keeps it all tidy," while 27 percent chose "Mom and dad split the work." (The rest were sprinkled across other categories.) (CNN 2008a). That is a big group of people, but how were they selected? Anyone who came to the CNN website was allowed to respond. We don't know who they were, but we might imagine some ways in which they were not representative of the general population—Internet users, people interested in reading websites about housework, people who like to click on website polls, and so on. We simply don't know from that survey if those responses represent the population as a whole.

Ideally, we would choose people by random selection, ensuring that each person in the group we want to study has the same likelihood of being interviewed in the survey. That is the best way to ensure that our results are not skewed by who is included or excluded. Students are sometimes skeptical about the principle of random selection. Is it really possible, for example, that the opinions of 500 people can accurately reflect those of 245 million American adults? If it's done right, the short answer is yes; the long answer has to do with probability theory. (If you don't believe me, consider this: When I have my cholesterol checked, why don't I have all of my blood removed instead of just a few ounces?)

We find the clearest evidence of the effectiveness of sample surveys when we can successfully use them to predict people's behavior, as has been done with many political elections. In the 2012 presidential election, for example, a careful analysis of the preelection polls allowed statistician Nate Silver to accurately predict for every single state whether Barack Obama or Mitt Romney would win in the actual election-day voting (M. Cooper 2012). On the other hand, in the 2016 election, although most analysts correctly predicted that Hillary Clinton would get more votes than Donald Trump overall, they were wrong about the vote in several key states that were decisive in the Electoral College. The sample surveys used in that election apparently did not successfully select voters at random (for example, Trump voters may have been more likely to hang up on the survey

takers), or perhaps some voters didn't accurately report their voting intentions (maybe they were embarrassed to say they would vote for Trump). Although there are many ways that surveys can produce errors or lead to ambiguous results, the principle of random selection helps to ensure that we are not misled by research results from relatively small numbers of people.

In addition to random selection, we also make an important distinction between different kinds of surveys. As we have seen, the questions that concern us may involve interrelated sequences of events, such as the connection between nursery room lighting in infancy and nearsightedness years later. Still, although we are interested in events that occur years apart, most surveys are administered only once to each person. Others, known as **longitudinal surveys**, interview the same people repeatedly over a period of time. Tracking people over time is essential for answering questions about sequences of events. For example, researchers have long wondered whether the increase in divorce is the result of women gaining economic independence, so they don't "need" to be married. Or maybe it is the other way around, and women get jobs because they are afraid that a divorce will leave them out on a limb with little work experience (see Chapter 10). Only by carefully following families over time could researchers find that couples do divorce more often when women earn their own income, but marriage quality and satisfaction are even more important (Sayer and Bianchi 2000). Such surveys are time-consuming and expensive, since interviewees have to be tracked down again and again over a period of years, which is why the major longitudinal surveys are at least partly funded by the government, with many researchers sharing access to the data.

longitudinal surveys

A research method in which the same people are interviewed repeatedly over a period of time.

Even surveys in which each person is interviewed only once may be repeated at regular intervals, which allows us to track trends in people's answers over time. For example, the federal government has for decades conducted the Current Population Survey (CPS) every month, interviewing representatives from thousands

Jackie, Sue, and Lynn are three of the subjects in *49 Up*, a 2005 documentary in the Up series that began in 1964 when they were seven years old. The series has revisited most of them every seven years since.

of households to generate such important facts as the national unemployment rate. And because the CPS also includes questions on family structure, we can confidently estimate, for example, that the employment rate of unmarried mothers fell from 72 percent to 68 percent over the decade from 2005 to 2015 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016a). Similarly, the General Social Survey (GSS) has been asking questions about American attitudes since 1972. From this survey we know, for example, that 36 percent of American adults considered sex before marriage "always wrong" in 1972, but that dropped to 20 percent by 2016 (Smith et al. 2017). These repeated surveys are essential for studying social change, another central focus of this book.

In-Depth Interviews and Observation

Sample surveys provide much of the basic knowledge we need to understand trends and patterns in family life. However, researchers often must make assumptions or speculate about the meaning underlying the behavior and attitudes measured by sample surveys. Even when we ask people directly about their attitudes, such as whether mothers or fathers should spend more time taking care of their children, the answers may be superficial, and respondents answer only those questions we think of asking in advance. Some researchers prefer not to be limited by brief answers to questions they bring to an interview.

One way to avoid this problem is to arrange much longer, in-depth interviews with a small number of people, usually those who share traits researchers want to study. For example, Sarah Damaske, for her book *For the Family? How Class and Gender Shape Women's Work* (2011), interviewed 80 women for several hours each to trace their employment histories and the reasons they gave for their decisions. She found that both working-class and middle-class mothers used a language of economic need to justify their decisions to work outside their homes, even though it was better-off mothers who were more likely to work steadily throughout their careers. Working-class women, on the other hand, were more likely to face difficult work-family tradeoffs that compelled them to move in and out of the labor force over time (see Chapter 11).

Even in-depth interviews, however, rely on the answers provided to the researcher. Sometimes, interpersonal dynamics and the subtleties of daily life are best studied through direct observation and interaction with the subjects of the research, known as ethnography. This was the method employed by Annette Lareau for her influential study *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (2003). Lareau and her assistants inserted themselves into the lives of 12 families for about a month each, following them from place to place and taking copious notes on how the parents arranged their children's daily lives and interactions with the social world. Through this approach, researchers often learn things people would not reveal if asked, or may not even realize about their own lives (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). The results of Lareau's study revealed sharp contrasts in parenting style—and the meanings parents attributed to childhood—according to the social class of the family (see Chapter 4).

Time Use Studies

Most of what happens within families is informal. Unlike a job setting, there is no formal record of who does what, for which rewards, and who answers to whom. And there is no way of measuring how successful families are comparable to sales figures or profits reports in the private sector or services delivered in the government sector. Therefore, researchers studying families often rely on asking people in interviews to describe what they do or observing them firsthand.

To develop a more detailed accounting of what goes on within families, some researchers have produced **time use studies** that collect detailed data on how family members spend their time. Some of these studies are simply surveys in which the questions focus on how people spend their time. Others use time

time use studies

Surveys that collect data on how people spend their time during a sample period, such as a single day or week.

WORKSHOP

Theory and Evidence

Different theoretical perspectives and methods of gathering information can help us translate descriptions of particular family events or situations into more general knowledge about families and society.

- Brainstorm several examples of a family conflict, dramatic event, or daily occurrence. Try to think of situations that might be representative of a broader social phenomenon. For example, you might describe a family-related crime story from a TV drama, the changing family structure you or someone you know grew up in, or the real-life saga of a politician or celebrity in the news.
- Choose two theories or perspectives from the chapter that interest you. Describe how a theorist from each perspective might explain the examples you came up with. These do not have to be contradictory; they might simply provide alternative ways of looking at the situations in question or generate ideas about their underlying social causes.
- Select two methods of gathering data described in the chapter. Try to imagine how a researcher might use each method to gather information about the kind of situations or events you are trying to explain—for example, by collecting survey data or directly observing the behavior in question.
- Choosing one of your examples, combine one method and one theory that you think would most fruitfully develop your understanding of the social dynamics in question. Explain why you suggest this approach to turn your description of this case into more general sociological knowledge. What would you hope to discover from your study? How might your study change the way others think about this question?

diaries. Rather than asking people, for example, how many hours last week they spent watching TV or reading to their children, time diary studies ask people to record what they were doing, where they were, and who they were with for small increments of time over an entire day (Craig and Mullan 2011).

Time diary studies have been especially valuable in the study of work and families, as we will see in Chapter 11. For example, a large national survey in the 1990s asked men and women to estimate how many hours per week they did various household chores and other work. However, when researchers tallied up the hours spent on all the different activities, it often came to more than the number of hours there are in a week (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006)! In contrast, when people are asked to fill out time diaries, recording their activities over the course of the day, the time estimates are more accurate. Recent time diaries show men spending just 10 hours per week on housework and women spending 16 hours per week (Bianchi et al. 2012). This method provides a window into the minute interactions that make up family life, but permits studying larger groups of people than is possible with in-depth interviews or observation.

Trend to Watch: Big Data

big data

Data collections large enough to require special computing resources, and complex enough to require customized computer applications.

Big data research is increasingly common. Although there is not a single definition, we may define **big data** as data large enough to require special computing resources, and complex enough to require customized computer applications (Lazer and Radford 2017). Unlike surveys or Census data, big data usually were not generated for research purposes, but we can use them for social science research. Most often this research involves analyzing large volumes of text from online social interaction, such as social media sites. With billions of interactions occurring online every day, many of them leaving a digital trace, the potential to understand new forms of social behavior is exciting. For example, one study examined more than four billion tweets by 63 million users to measure patterns of happiness, finding that people send happier tweets on Friday and Saturday, and least happy tweets on Monday and Tuesday (Dodds et al. 2011). In another, controversial study, researchers at Facebook manipulated the posts that users saw, demonstrating that positive and negative moods spread contagiously among users, like diseases, even when people don't interact face-to-face (Kramer, Guillory, and Hancock 2014).

In addition to social media, big data analysts have also examined data from large databases of official records, phone records, and government documents (my own analysis of names, described in Chapter 2, is an example of such big data research). For example, a study of more than 40 million tax records for families over two generations found that children whose parents weren't married were less likely to escape lower social class positions when they grow up than were children whose parents were married (Chetty et al. 2014). The ability to mine sources of data like these, and finding new ways to analyze them, offers great potential for future studies of family life.