

Chapter

12

Family Groups and Systems



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Synopsis

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Variation in Kinship and Family Organization

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- Norms of Residence
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If we want to understand society and social life, it is impossible to ignore the family. Most of us spend a major portion of our lives in one form of family or another. It is unlikely that any society has ever existed without some social arrangement that could be termed “family,” and we cannot overestimate its importance to the individual and to society as a whole.

This chapter considers the family as a group, as a social system, and as a social institution. For most of us, the family serves as a primary social group; it is the first agency of socialization. Sociologists consider the family to be a *social system* because it is composed of interdependent parts, it has a characteristic organization and pattern of functioning, and it has subsystems that are part of the larger system. The family is considered a *social institution* because it is an area of social life that is organized into discernible patterns and because it helps to meet crucial societal goals.

Families do not exist in isolation, of course. They are an interdependent unit of the larger society. If families have many children, for example, schools may become crowded and unemployment may become a problem. On the other hand, if they have few children, Social Security, the care of the aged, and an adequate workforce may become important issues over several generations. It also makes a difference whether only one spouse is employed or both are. Do newlyweds live with one set of parents or establish an independent residence? Is divorce frequent or infrequent? Do people select their own spouses or do others select for them? Family practices have a profound influence on many aspects of social life.

We begin our discussion by clarifying what we mean by the term *family*. Although the answer may appear quite obvious to most of us, it becomes less obvious to judges who must make decisions on property settlements between cohabiting couples, social service workers who get adoption requests from unmarried people, or government agencies that must decide who is eligible for various benefits. Some definitions result in informal stigmatization and discrimination against families who do not meet the qualifications, such as a mother and her child, two men, or an unmarried man and woman.

Focal Point

A New US American Family?



The US American family is undergoing radical changes. Until recently, families in the United States almost always consisted of a husband and wife, their children, and frequently their extended family. Divorce was rare until the middle of the 20th century, and sex was a topic not widely discussed in public. However, today, most US American families no longer fit the traditional mold. In fact, modern families are more diverse than ever. Moreover, tolerance of alternate family forms and family-related behavior is on the rise.



“Modern Family cast in Australia” by Roderick Eime under a CC by 2.0 license via Wikimedia

Our traditional images of the “normal” family consisting of mother, father, and children are gradually being expanded to include a variety of family forms, as the television show “Modern Family” depicts.

A Supreme Court decision in June 2015 held that same-sex couples had a constitutional right to wed (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015). This reflects a shift in public opinion where many US Americans now support gay unions. However, though the attitudes of many have changed, gay marriage still faces opposition. A case involving Kim Davis, a clerk in Rowan County, Kentucky, made national headlines; in 2015, Davis spent 5 days in jail after she refused to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples in defiance of the courts. Social conservatives cheered her cause, while critics condemned her “bigoted neglect of her official duties” (H. Wong, 2018).

Masterpiece Cakeshop, a bakery in Lakewood, Colorado, also became the center of controversy when they refused to make a wedding cake to celebrate the marriage of a gay couple, citing the owner’s religious beliefs. The Colorado Civil Rights Commission ruled that Masterpiece Cakeshop had violated antidiscrimination laws, but when the cake shop owners challenged the ruling in the Supreme Court, the court overturned it, saying that the Colorado Civil Rights Commission had mishandled the case and infringed on Masterpiece Cakeshop’s religious liberty; the Supreme Court avoided the issue of whether public accommodations laws take precedence over the right to refuse service based on religious belief (Warner, 2019). Clearly, ideas about the “proper” makeup of a family are still deeply divided.

Another alternate family form, polygamy, is also slowly gaining legitimacy (Hostin, 2008)—although it remains hotly contested. Critics argue that it undermines gender equality because, in practice, it most often takes the form of *polygyny* (marriage between one husband and multiple wives) (Bailey & Kaufman, 2015). In 2019, after women who had escaped polygamist clans testified to the Utah legislature about the sexual, psychological, and economic abuse they endured, the state passed a law granting women who flee polygamist relationships the eligibility to receive funds for counseling, medical care, or other needs (Shenefelt, 2019).

The above cases underscore a core tenet of this chapter: Family systems and the social expectations that go along with them are relative. The United States has traditionally encouraged monogamy and fidelity while discouraging divorce and adultery. Powerful social and political forces have whittled away at these traditions, however. As a result, the appearance of the US American family in the years to come may be significantly different than the one people today think of as “normal.” If these trends continue, families in the US will almost certainly be fundamentally different by the turn of the next century.

12.1 What Is Family?

The term **family**, as defined by the US Census, refers to a group of two or more persons related by birth, marriage, or adoption, who share a common residence. Additionally, although not part of the US Census definition, those individuals typically assume reciprocal rights and obligations regarding one another. Many scholars and writers go beyond this definition of the family. They recognize the reality of childfree marriages, stepparents, one-parent households, same-sex marriages, and cohabiting couples. Currently, we can think about families in terms of intimate relationships, sexual bonds, and family realms.

The traditional definition of *family* suggests legal unions, permanence, children, intergenerational continuity, and a perceived ideal of what families “should be.” The nontraditional definition suggests a broader and more comprehensive portrayal of intimate relationships that often fall outside of fixed boundaries. Thus, a cohabiting couple without children would not be a family in traditional terms of blood, marriage, or adoptive ties. However, in terms of family-like relationships based on what families do (engage in intimate interactions, share household expenses and a division of labor, recognize other members as part of a primary, intimate bonded unit), some cohabiting partners are being recognized as families for purposes of property settlements, housing regulations for “families only,” or employee benefit plans. Up to this point, however, few statistics have included these types of families.

This is not to deny the tremendous variations in traditional family structures and processes that exist in our own culture and in others around the world. Families can be *conjugal*, *nuclear*, *families of orientation* or *procreation*, or *extended*, or they can have a modified *extended family structure*. The smallest units are called **conjugal families**, which must include two partners but may or may not include children. **Nuclear families** may or may not include two spouses—they consist of any two or more people related to one another by blood, marriage, or adoption who share a common residence. Thus, a brother and sister or a single parent and child would be nuclear families but not conjugal families. These terms are sometimes used interchangeably, and some families fall under both categories.

The definition of family used in Census reporting in the United States is the nuclear family. Family households are identified when the members of a household are related to the householder. When two or more members of a household are related, regardless of whether the householder is in that family, they are considered a family group. In 2021, there were 84.27 million family households. Of these, 61.4 million (nearly 73%) were husband-and-wife family households. There are nearly 7 million (8.3%) single-parent households with a male householder (with or without their own children), while women are the sole householders in 15.5 million (18.4%) family households (Korhonen, 2024d).

Family

A group of kin united by blood, marriage, or adoption who share a common residence for some part of their lives and assume reciprocal rights and obligations with regard to one another

Conjugal families

Families consisting of two partners, with or without children

Nuclear families

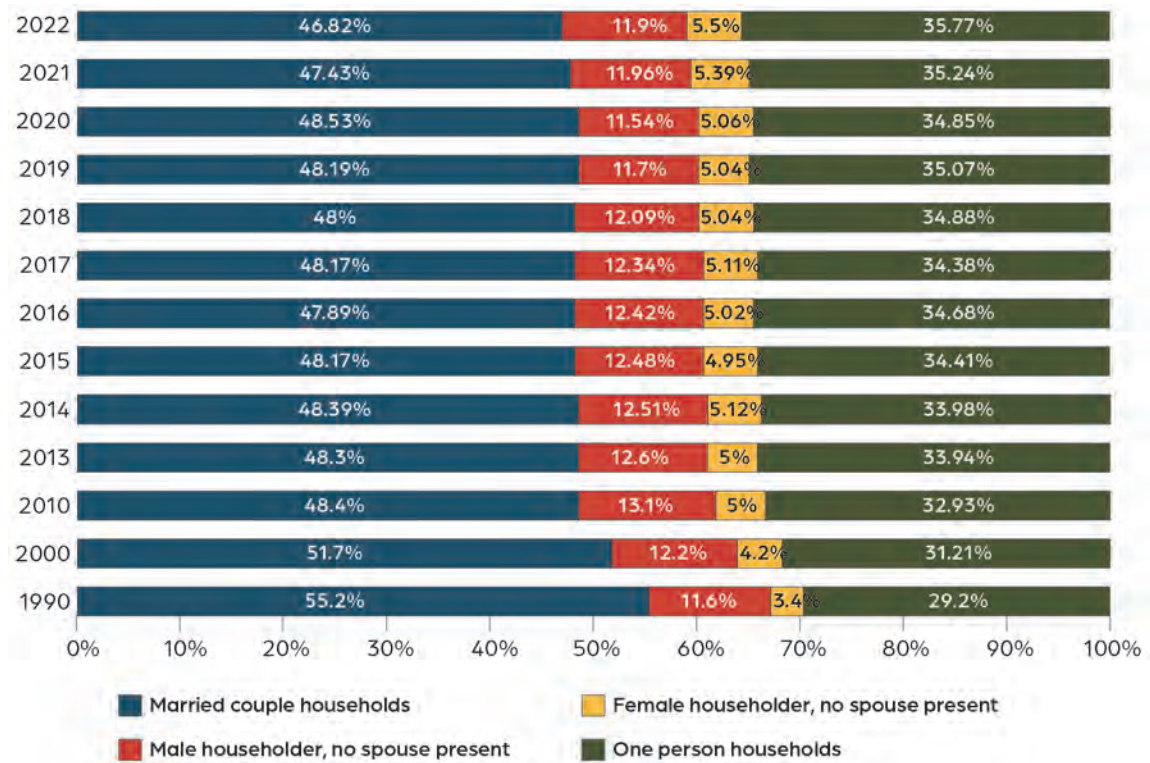
Families in which two or more people are related by blood, marriage, or adoption and share a common residence



In most societies, the norm is the extended family, which includes nuclear families and other relatives.

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Figure 12-1 Households by Type, 1990 to 2022



Adapted from "Percentage of U.S. households from 1990 to 2022, by type," by V. Korhonen, 2024e, *Statista*, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/242244/percentage-of-us-households-by-type/>. Copyright 2024 by Statista.

Traditionally, family households made up the majority of all households. The number of households in the US increased by 41% (37.9 million) between 1990 and 2022. However, the number of married couple households decreased by 8.4% during the same period. The number of unmarried couple households increased by 2.4% and the number of one person households increased by 6.6% (Korhonen, 2024e). Most people in the US marry at some time in their lives (Zinn & Eitzen, 2005), but according to the Pew Research Center, as of 2021, the percentage who have never been married is at a historic high, with around 25% of 40-year-olds adults having never been married. This is up from a historic low of 6% in 1980 (Pew Research Center, 2023).

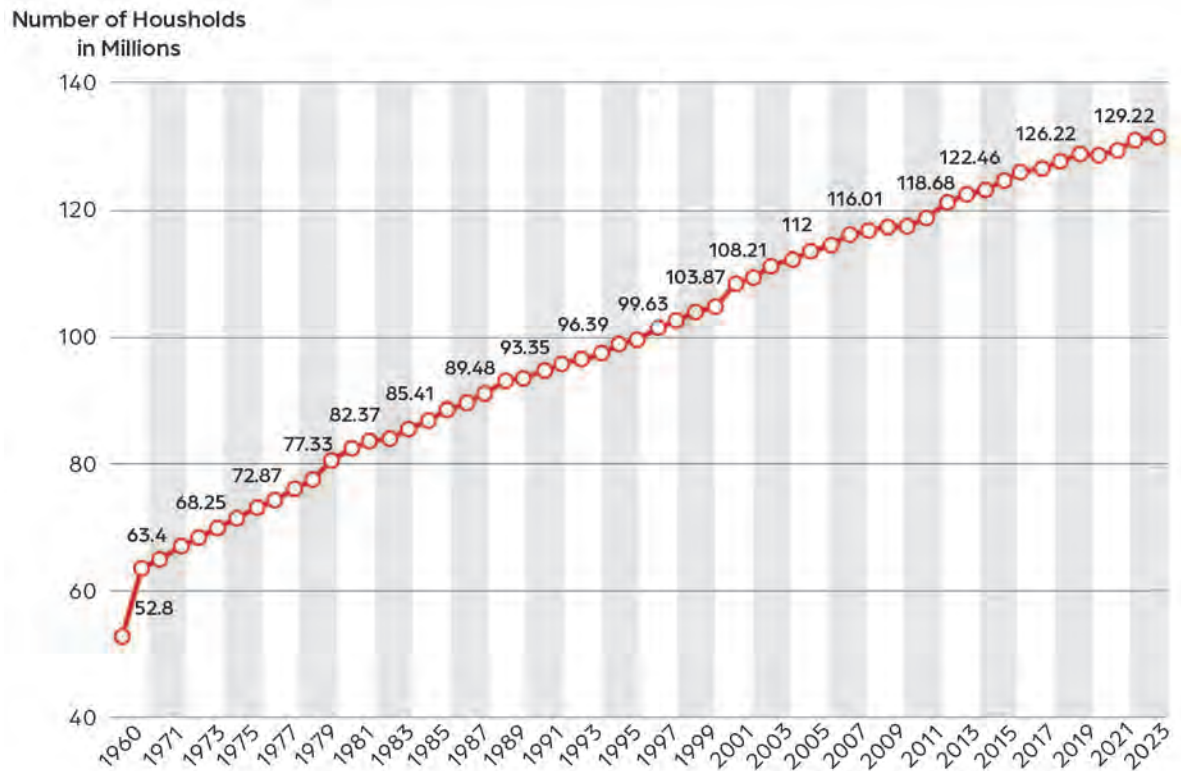
The percentage of people in the US, who have been married at some point is down from 80% in 2006 to 69% in 2020 (around a 15% decrease in people who have married), with about 13% more men never being married than women (Betchen, 2023; Jones, 2020). Nevertheless, most Americans still get married (Jones, 2020). In so doing, they become members of two different, but overlapping, nuclear families. The nuclear family in which a person is born and/or reared (typically consisting of the person, their parent(s), and perhaps siblings) is termed the **family of orientation**. This is the family in which most basic early childhood socialization occurs. When a person marries, a new nuclear (and conjugal) family is formed, which is called the **family of procreation**. This family consists of the person, a spouse, and perhaps children. These relations are diagrammed in Figure 12-3.

Family of orientation

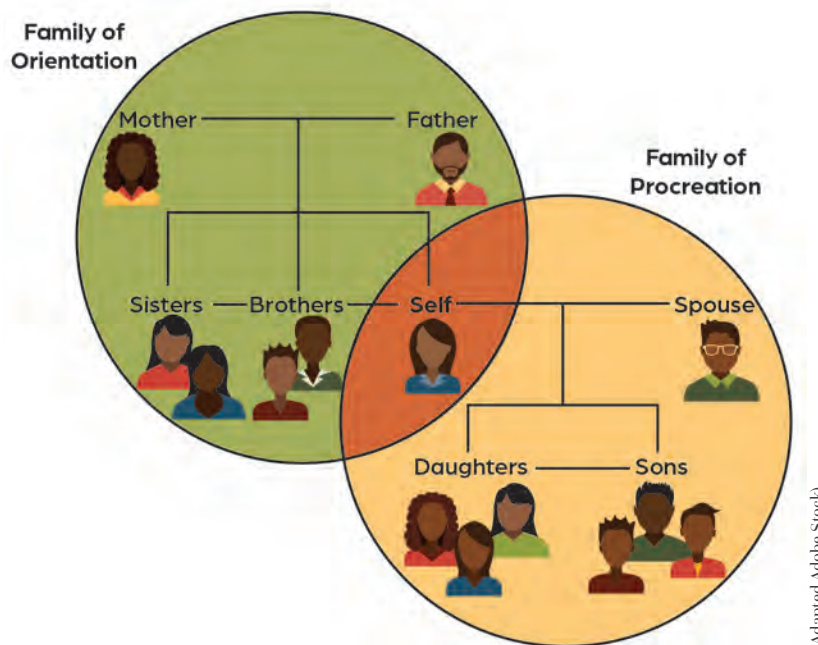
The nuclear family into which one was born and/or in which one was reared

Family of procreation

The nuclear family formed by marriage

Figure 12-2 Number of Households, 1960–2023

Adapted from "Number of households in the U.S. from 1960 to 2023," by V. Korhonen, 2024c, *Statista*, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/183635/number-of-households-in-the-us/>. Copyright 2024 by Statista.

Figure 12-3 Families of Orientation and of Procreation

In the world as a whole, conjugal and nuclear families as isolated and independent units are rare. In most societies, the norm is the **extended family**, which goes beyond the nuclear family to include other nuclear families and relatives, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Is the typical family in the United States nuclear or extended? Actually, it is something in between. Families in the US are not truly isolated nuclear units, separate from extended kin contacts and support, nor are they extended families in the traditional sense of sharing the same household. US families typically have what is called a **modified extended family structure**, in which individual nuclear families retain considerable autonomy and yet maintain connections with other nuclear families through visits, calls, or the exchange of goods, services, or affectionate greetings. This type of family differs from the traditional extended family in that its members may live in different parts of the country and may choose their occupations independently rather than following a parent's occupation.

Applying Definitions of Family

It is important, for many reasons, to realize that there may be more than one acceptable definition of what a family is. Social scientist Arlene Skolnick (1992) points out that one of the major obstacles to social scientists in studying and understanding the family is the temptation to use our own experience as a basis for generalizations and comparisons. We all have a great deal of experience with our own families, and each of us has a tendency to want to use this as a basis for insights and theories about families in general. Recognizing that there is tremendous variety in the types of family patterns is an essential part of social scientists overcoming their own ethnocentrism, stereotypes, and prejudices, which might get in the way of doing objective research.

As suggested earlier, it is important for politicians to understand the people their policies will affect. Thus, policy makers need to understand that because there are variations in types of families, strict definitions may be problematic. As Skolnick (1991) and others who have explored the impact of policies on families have noted, how a family is defined has important consequences for the nature of policies and how they are carried out. Zoning laws, tax laws, welfare regulations, federally funded student loan guidelines, and many other policies employ a particular definition of a family. Limiting the definition of a family to one type—or even a few—can have serious consequences for people's lives. Suppose there is a single-family zoning ordinance in a particular area. Are two unmarried people who live together considered a family? Are two spouses, their children, and one spouse's parents and brother a single family or two? How that zoning ordinance defines what a family is would impact living in the area in question. Policy makers need to understand that families may not necessarily be limited to the middle-class norm of mother, father, and their children residing together in a male-dominated household.

In a clinical setting, the therapeutic and counseling techniques used by marriage and family counselors may be determined largely by how the family is defined. Assuming that there is only one definition of the family could lead some therapists to look at families that fall outside that definition as pathological or troubled. Certainly, some families are in trouble, but not necessarily because they do not

Extended family

A family that goes beyond the nuclear family to include other nuclear families and relatives such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins

Modified extended family structure

The family structure in which individual nuclear families retain considerable autonomy yet maintain connections with other nuclear families in the extended family structure

fit the norm of the White, middle-class nuclear family. In recognizing that there are many possible ways to live as a family, marriage counselors might be able to be more creative and flexible in what they have to offer their clients.

Finally, and perhaps most important for you, the recognition that there is more than one acceptable definition of a family can lead to more choices and freedom in your own life. This does not mean, however, that you have complete freedom to live the way you want to or that every family pattern will necessarily work. As this chapter shows later, many family and kinship patterns may be workable only in a particular social context that emphasizes the social creation and construction of family and kinship patterns. However, the options that are workable in a particular social context may not be as limited as they were once thought to be.

Family groups and systems are only one type of kinship association. **Kinship** is the web of relationships among people linked by common ancestry, adoption, or marriage. All societies have general norms for defining family and kin groups and how these relationships are organized. These norms concern such matters as who lives together, who is the head of the group, who marries whom, how mates are selected, which relatives in family and kin groups are most important, and how and by whom children are to be raised. Although some general norms tend to determine the statuses and roles of family members, other norms and the kinship systems they govern vary greatly. These variations are discussed in the next section.

Kinship

The web of relationships among people linked by common ancestry, adoption, or marriage

Thinking Sociologically

1. Examine both traditional and nontraditional definitions of *family*. How might family policies differ, depending on the definition used?
2. To what extent do families in the United States resemble a modified extended family structure in terms of patterns of offering assistance, visiting one another, or keeping in touch via email, phone calls, or letter writing?
3. Choose two family forms to compare. Discuss whether each can meet the basic tasks required of family units. What can you conclude about “what a family really is”?
4. Find information, through an internet search (using discretion to find a reputable site), on the 2015 Supreme Court case of *Obergefell v. Hodges*. What was the outcome? Discuss its implications for the future of the “family” in the United States. Consider what impact this decision might have on the types of households illustrated in Figure 12-1.

12.2 Variation in Kinship and Family Organization

Each society defines particular patterns of marriage, family, and kinship as correct and proper. Because we tend to be ethnocentric and to favor the family structure found in our own society, we may overlook the wide range of variations that exist. We may also tend to assume that if our family patterns change too drastically, the institution of the family will collapse. It is important to recognize that a tremendous variety of marriage, family, and kinship patterns exist and that any of these patterns may be both appropriate and workable in a particular social context. One fundamental variation concerns marriage and the number of spouses considered acceptable.

12.2a Marriage and Number of Spouses

Marital status (single, married, separated, widowed, divorced) and number of spouses (none, one, more than one) are two major ways family organization can vary. Every society permits some form of marriage—although some groups, such as the Catholic Church, take the position that people in some roles, such as nuns and priests, must take vows of chastity and remain unmarried in order to devote their lives fully to religious pursuits. Totally apart from religious reasons, in the United States today, it seems that remaining single may be emerging as an acceptable lifestyle. It is unclear, however, whether this is a permanent alternative to marriage or just a delay in marriage.

To most people in the US, the most “proper” form of marriage is **monogamy**, in which one person is married to one other person at a time. Throughout the world, this form of marriage is the only one universally recognized; it is the predominant form even in societies where other forms exist. However, less than 20% of the world’s societies are strictly monogamous, considering monogamy the *only* acceptable form of marriage.

While the United States is strictly monogamous, people in the US frequently have more than one spouse over a lifetime. This pattern of marriage, divorce, and remarriage is called **serial** or **sequential monogamy**. It is both legally and socially acceptable to have more than one spouse as long as it is done sequentially and not simultaneously. It is completely illegal in every state in the United States to be married to more than one person at any given time.

There are a variety of alternatives to monogamy. Murdock (1957) investigated the frequency of **polygamy**, marriage to more than one spouse, in a sample of 565 societies from around the world. He found that **polygyny**, in which a man has more than one wife, was the norm in 75% of these societies, whereas **polyandry**, in which a woman has more than one husband, was culturally favored in less than 1%. **Group marriage**, in which several or many men are married to several or many women, has been practiced among selected groups in some societies; however, nowhere is it the dominant form (Murdock, 1949).

One example of group marriage in the United States was the Oneida Community, which founded Oneida Ltd., a well-known manufacturer of tableware and cutlery that is still around today. For about 30 years in the mid-1800s, John Humphrey

Monogamy

The marriage of one person to one other person

Serial (sequential) monogamy

Marriage to a number of different spouses in succession, but only one at any given time

Polygamy

Marriage to more than one spouse at the same time

Polygyny

Marriage in which a man has more than one wife at the same time

Polyandry

Marriage in which a woman has more than one husband at the same time

Group marriage

A form of marriage in which several or many men are married to several or many women

Noyes preached that people were capable of living sinless lives based on the spiritual equality of all people: materially, socially, and sexually. The outcome of this teaching was a group marriage structure where all adults were recognized as married to each other, children were raised communally (even their conception was a community decision), and the total emphasis was on “we” rather than “I.”

In discussing polygamy or any family structure with a plural number of spouses, several words of caution are in order. First, a distinction must be made between ideology and actual occurrence. The fact that a society permits one to have several spouses does not necessarily mean that a large proportion of all marriages are polygamous. Second, except for group marriage, multiple spouses are possible on a large scale only when the ratio of the sexes is unbalanced. Third, when polygamy is practiced, it is controlled by societal norms like any other form of marriage. Rather than resulting from strictly personal or psychological motives, it is supported by the values and norms of both sexes and is closely linked to the economic conditions and belief systems of the wider society. Fourth, polygamy itself may take a variety of forms. The multiple husbands may all be brothers or the multiple wives may all be sisters, for example.

The most common form of polygamy is polygyny. In many societies, having several wives is a mark of prestige and high status. The wealthy, the leaders, and the best hunters may get a second or third wife. Multiple wives may also be desired as a source of children, especially sons. Polygyny is very common in Africa, among Muslim groups in the Middle East and Asia, and in many tribal groups in South America and throughout the world. In Ibadan, Nigeria, for example, a study of more than 6,600 women (Ware, 1979) found that nearly one wife in two was living in a polygamous marriage; the proportion rose to two out of three for wives age 40 and above. The Muslim religion permits men to have up to four wives. In the United States, despite its illegality, some Mormon fundamentalists living in Utah and neighboring states practice polygyny.

While the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (often referred to as LDS or Mormonism) has officially rejected polygamy for over a century, Joseph Smith (the religion’s founder) is believed to have received revelation in 1843 that plural marriage was divinely sanctioned. (Although, there is evidence that he preached the principles of plural marriage as early as 1831. See Doctrine and Covenants Section 132.) In 1890, however, church president Wilford Woodruff issued a formal manifesto against plural marriage (see Official Statement 1 in the Doctrine and Covenants and Mould 2011, pp. 238–240). Although Woodruff would later describe his manifesto as divine revelation, it was also politically expedient, paving the way for Utah’s petition for statehood (Lyman, 1986). Accordingly, while polygamy was legal in the Utah territory, it was never legal in the state of Utah.

The next few decades were complicated for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, especially for those who had entered into plural marriage or who believed in Joseph Smith’s initial revelation. Historical records reveal that some members continued to engage in plural marriage until 1904, when a second



(Adobe Stock)

Marital status is just one major way family organization can vary.



The *Sister Wives* cast being interviewed on the *Valder Beebe Show* in 2019.

manifesto was issued by church president Joseph F. Smith (nephew of founder Joseph Smith). While new plural marriages were not sanctioned, many church members maintained their existing plural marriages into the 1940s and '50s (Embry, 1994). Disagreement over plural marriage led to splintering within the church and the eventual creation of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (FLDS). Unlike members of the LDS church, some FLDS members continue to practice plural marriage, as highlighted in popular reality and fictionalized television shows such as *Sister Wives* and *Big Love*.

One of the most shocking cases of polygamy in Utah centered on the now infamous Warren

Steed Jeffs, a radical member of the FLDS Church until 2007. Jeffs gained national notoriety in 2006 when he was placed on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list for unlawful flight to avoid prosecution in Utah on charges of sexually assaulting a minor. In 2007, Jeffs was found guilty and is now behind bars for life. He was reputed to have 78 wives at the time of his conviction. It is important to note that the LDS Church does not recognize the FLDS Church and took steps to further distance itself from the FLDS Church after the Warren Jeffs incident due to the media's lack of attention to distinguishing between the two organizations (Cragun & Nielsen, 2009).

Polyandry is quite rare. Where it is practiced, the cohusbands are usually brothers, either blood brothers or clan brothers who belong to the same clan and are of the same generation. Among the Toda, for example, a non-Hindu tribe in India, it was traditionally understood that when a woman married a man, she would become the wife of his brothers at the same time. This type of polyandry, where brothers are cohusbands, may also be referred to as **fraternal polyandry**.

Fraternal polyandry

A form of polyandry where brothers are cohusbands

Neolocal

A family norm that a newly married couple should establish a residence separate from both of their families

Patrilocal

A family norm that a newly married couple should live with the husband's family

Matrilocal

A family norm that a newly married couple should live with the wife's family

12.2b Norms of Residence

When people marry, they must decide where to live. Decisions about place of residence are typically dictated by societal norms and conform to one of three patterns. In Western societies, the residence norm is **neolocal**—the couple lives alone wherever they wish—but this pattern is rare in the rest of the world. Of the societies Murdock (1949) examined, only about 10% considered it appropriate for newlywed couples to move to a place of residence separate from both their families. This type of residence pattern seems to be linked with norms of monogamy and individualism. Between one-half and two-thirds of the societies studied by Murdock were **patrilocal**—the newlywed couple lived not just in the groom's community but also usually in his parents' home or compound. In the United States, Amish communities represent one example of a patrilocal system. A **matrilocal** residence pattern, in which the newly married couple lives with the wife's family, was the norm in about 15% of the societies Murdock studied and was generally found where women held title to the land.

12.2c Norms of Descent and Inheritance

Children inherit two separate bloodlines at birth, the mother's and the father's. Most societies place more importance on one lineage or the other. In much of the Western world, particularly in the United States, lineage is of small importance. It determines surname but little else. In most societies, however, explicit rules indicate that one bloodline is more important than the other. These rules are known as the *norms of descent and inheritance*.

The most common norms of descent are **patrilineal**, in which kinship is traced through the male kin, the father's lineage. In this type of descent system, offspring owe a special allegiance and loyalty to the father and his kin, who in turn protect and socialize the children and eventually pass to the sons their authority, property, and wealth. Under this system, the key ties are those among fathers, sons, and grandsons. The wife may maintain ties to her kin, and she contributes her genes to her children; however, she and her children are considered members of her husband's family.

In a **matrilineal** system of descent, descent and inheritance are traced through the mother's line. The mother's kin assume the important role among offspring. Matrilineal norms of descent are uncommon, but they do exist. Among the Trobriand Islanders, for example, kinship, wealth, and responsibility for support are traced through the female line.

In the United States, the norm is to assign influence, wealth, and power to both sides of the family. This system is referred to as **bilateral lineage**. Kinship lines are traced equally through the biological relatives of both the mother and the father, and inheritance is passed on in equal proportions to all children regardless of sex. One consequence of this descent system is that, although the kin of both parents are recognized and respected, neither kin group exerts much power and influence over the children, which has a significant effect on social change: A newlywed couple coming from families with different values and lifestyles may choose to conform to neither and establish a lifestyle of their own. In addition, the likelihood of marrying someone with different values increases because the parents and kin groups in bilateral systems have relatively little influence over whom their children marry.

12.2d Norms of Authority

All families and kinship systems have norms concerning who makes important decisions. These norms follow the pattern of other norm variations in that they are aligned with gender. Most societies are **patriarchal**—the men have the power and authority and are dominant. In countries like Iran, the male position of dominance is even reflected in the law. However, it is important to recognize that even when authority rests with the men, other family members can have a strong influence on the decision-making process. Male family members may be most influential, but wives and mothers often have a strong impact on decisions as well.

In matriarchal societies, the authority rests with the women, especially wives and mothers. **Matriarchal** systems are rare, even among matrilineal societies. While the Trobriand Islanders are matrilineal, they are neither matriarchal nor patriarchal. The least common pattern of authority is the **egalitarian** model, in which decisions are equally divided between husband and wife. Some have argued that the United States is egalitarian because husbands and wives either

Patrilineal

A family system in which descent and inheritance are traced through the father's line

Matrilineal

A family system in which descent and inheritance are traced through the mother's line

Bilateral lineage

A descent system in which influence, wealth, and power are assigned to both sides of the family

Patriarchal

A society in which men have the power and authority and are dominant

Matriarchal

A society in which women have the power and authority and are dominant

Egalitarian

A norm of authority in which decisions are equally divided between spouses

make decisions jointly or assume responsibility for different areas of concern. The husband might make decisions related to his job, the automobile, or home repairs, whereas the wife might make decisions related to her job, the home, food, clothing, or the children. Many would argue that the family system in the United States is more patriarchal than egalitarian, however, because males have traditionally controlled income and other family resources.

12.2e Norms for Choice of Marriage Partner

Every society, including the United States, has norms concerning the appropriateness or acceptability of different marriage partners. These norms can be divided into two categories: **exogamy**, in which people must marry outside of their own group, and **endogamy**, which requires that people considering marriage share particular group characteristics, such as age, race, religion, or socioeconomic status.

Some exogamous norms are almost universal. **Incest**—sexual relations with or marriage to close relatives—is forbidden in almost every society. One cannot marry one’s mother, father, brother, sister, son, or daughter. Isolated exceptions to this taboo

are said to have existed between Egyptian and Inca royalty. Most societies also forbid marriage between first cousins and many societies forbid marriage between members of the same sex. Norms about same-sex marriage are changing, however, and 40 countries now allow it, including the United States (Rozelle et al., 2024).

Endogamous norms of one sort or another are also very widespread, although they vary greatly from one society to another. In the US, for example, marriages between members of different racial groups were considered improper, or even forbidden by law, at different times throughout history.

Why have norms concerning endogamy and exogamy evolved? It seems clear from their universality that they perform an important social function, but the nature of that function

is widely debated. A number of authorities have suggested that the incest taboo, for instance, is a result of the dangers of inbreeding. Others contend that the taboo is instinctive—that prolonged association with someone during childhood precludes viewing that person as a marriage partner; another theory is that marriage within a kinship group would lead to intense conflicts and jealousy. Each of these explanations has its shortcomings, however. Murdock (1949) suggests that a complete explanation of the incest taboo must synthesize theories from all the different disciplines that deal with human behavior.

There are also a number of explanations for endogamy. It is widely believed that members of similar groups share similar values, role expectations, and attitudes, resulting in fewer marital or kinship conflicts. For example, some suggest that people from similar age groups share similar developmental tasks and interests. Historically, marriage within the same race has been used to maintain what the race considered to be its “pure genetic traits.” Marriages between people of the same



(Adobe Stock)

Endogamous norms vary from one society to another. For example, marriages between members of different racial groups were considered improper at different times in the US.

Exogamy

A marriage norm requiring a person to marry someone from outside his or her own group

Endogamy

A marriage norm requiring a person to marry someone from his or her own group

Incest

Socially forbidden sexual relationships or marriages with certain close relatives

socioeconomic status keep wealth and power within that social class. Marriages within the same religious group may ensure that childrearing practices, family rituals, and beliefs relating to the sacred are all agreed upon. Although the norms of endogamy—and of what determines being in the same social group—vary among and within societies such as the United States, all societies foster suspicion and dislike of groups whose values, behaviors, and customs are unfamiliar or seem strange. This is a manifestation of Merton's in-group virtues to out-group vices. Both exogamy and endogamy, therefore, restrict the eligibility of available marriage partners for everyone.

Thinking Sociologically

1. Polygyny is known to exist as a legitimate form of marriage in many societies around the world. Why doesn't the United States legally permit polygyny? What about polyandry? Should the US legalize polygamy? Why or why not?
2. What are some consequences of each type of lineage system? Think of examples that illustrate whether families are patrilineal, matrilineal, or bilateral, and discuss what difference it makes.
3. What factors aid in determining "appropriate" societal norms regarding marriage and family? How does determining these factors help us understand societal unrest regarding marriage and family in the United States?

12.3 A Functionalist Perspective on the Family

The functionalist perspective emphasizes the structures of social systems and the functions of these parts in maintaining the society. Despite the many variations that exist in family structure around the world, families everywhere perform many of the same functions. Among the more important are socialization, affection and emotional support, sexual regulation, reproduction, and social placement.

12.3a Socialization

As discussed elsewhere, the family is one of the most important agents of socialization because it teaches its members the rules and expectations for behavior in society. Reiss (1965) argues that although families perform many functions, only the function of nurturant socialization of children is universal. Infants cannot survive without care, and they cannot develop into mentally, physically, and socially healthy human beings without the intimate environment a family (biological or adopted) provides. The family is not only more permanent than other social institutions but it also provides the care, protection, and love best suited to teaching children the

knowledge, skills, values, and norms of a society and subculture. While the socialization of children remains one of the primary functions of the family, with societal changes such as the need to have both parents working outside the home and the increase in the number of preschool and day care centers, socialization of children is not confined to the family as much as it used to be. Nevertheless, the family still remains the most significant source of socialization for children, especially for instilling a particular family's primary values, ideals, and practices. However excellent hospitals, child-care centers, and nursery or elementary schools may be, none seems to perform socialization and teaching functions as well as families can (in all their shapes and sizes) (Berns, 2013; Elkin & Handel, 1989; Pomykacz, 2011; Spitz, 1945). This emphasis on the infant and young child should not cause us to overlook the socialization function of the family on adults, however. Parents learn from each other, from their children, and from other kin as they interact in the intimate network bound by blood and marriage ties. This affective support is a second function provided by the family.

12.3b Affection and Emotional Support

Over half a century ago, Parsons and Bales (1955) suggested that the family has two essential functions: (1) the primary socialization of children so that they can become true members of the society in which they were born and (2) the stabilization of the adult personalities of the society. This second function, although often ignored, seems to be just as important as the first. Although some individuals enjoy living alone, most people need others who care, show affection, share joys and sorrows, and give support in times of need. Humans are social animals who depend on their families at every stage of the life cycle, and although friends, neighbors, coworkers, and government agencies also provide social support, none is as effective as the family—in whatever form it takes—at providing warm, supportive relationships.

The importance of this family function is evidenced in many different ways. Aging people particularly exemplify this idea. In studies, they often indicated that good relationships with their children are a major source of gratification. In fact, people who have a network of family connections may live longer than those who are single, widowed, or divorced.

12.3c Sexual Regulation

All societies approve of some sexual behaviors and disapprove of others. As mentioned earlier, there is an almost universal taboo against incest, whereas marriage is the most universally approved outlet for sexual behavior. Both are linked to the family system.

Societies control sexual activity in a number of ways. The chief means is by socializing sexual norms and attempting to enforce them. Secluding single women, for example, might enforce the norm of chastity. Society may also differentiate sexual rights in accordance with various roles and statuses (male, female, single, married, priest, teacher) and may place taboos on intercourse at certain times in the reproductive cycle, such as during menstruation, pregnancy, or immediately following childbirth. The norms of most societies discourage practices such as rape, child

molestation, voyeurism, and the like. Sexual norms are concerned with more than just sexual intercourse; they also cover such behaviors as kissing and touching as well as appropriate attitudes and values.

In the United States, the most pervasive socially approved sexual interest has traditionally been heterosexual. Sexual relationships are generally defined in terms of the family and marriage—take *premarital* or *extramarital* relationships, for example. Other institutions—religion, education, economics, or politics—may also regulate sexual behaviors and attitudes, but it is not one of their primary tasks. Families have the chief responsibility in this area, and because they regulate sexual activity, it seems logical that they also control the function of reproduction.

12.3d Reproduction

The family is the most widely approved social context for having children. Children are sometimes born outside a family, of course. But if this becomes common, it is considered a problem by most societies. According to the functionalist perspective, a society's reproductive practices should conform to institutional patterns and should be integrated with other societal functions, such as sexual regulation, physical and emotional support, and socialization. This view reflects the **principle of legitimacy**, formulated by Bronislaw Malinowski (1930) nearly a century ago. The principle states that every society has a rule that every child should have a legitimate father to act as the child's protector, guardian, and representative in the society.

Those who are not functionalists may be disturbed by this explanation of the role of the family. It suggests that children born outside of the family are stigmatized in some way—that they are illegitimate. Even functionalists would concede that there are functional alternatives to a biological father; father substitutes can fulfill the essential social tasks and roles of a father. Interactionists would also argue that the biological link between parent and child is less significant than the social links. Children need role models, social support, and patterns of interaction that will enable them to develop adequately and to function effectively in society.

Clinicians often deal with problems of adjustment between adopted children and their parents, who may have fears of rejection or inadequacy because they are not biologically related to their child. Counselors can help parents realize the overriding significance of the social ties between parent and child, and thus help to allay the parents' fears. With the acceptance and destigmatization of divorce today, as compared to earlier periods of US history, many of you will remarry and perhaps be involved in **blended families**—families composed of at least one formerly married spouse, the children of the previous marriage or marriages, and new offspring. Sometimes, stepparents feel guilty about not being able to instantly love their stepchildren. Other tensions may develop between biologically unrelated children. Realizing the essential significance of the social links between family members may help family members to overcome some of those tensions. A more active approach by family members and counselors working with such families could involve finding ways to strengthen those links through activities that provide close interaction and communication.

Principle of legitimacy

Malinowski's idea that every society has a rule that every child should have a legitimate father to act as the child's protector, guardian, and representative in society

Blended families

Families composed of at least one formerly married spouse, the children of the previous marriage or marriages, and new offspring



(Adobe Stock)

Clinicians often deal with problems of adjustment between adopted children and their parents.

Although it is true that children born outside a family can develop into functioning members of society, it is thought that the family universally fulfills the function of giving legal status and social approval to parenthood and reproduction. This function is related to another family function, that of social placement.

12.3e Social Placement

The social placement of children is a family function closely associated with socialization and reproduction. Social placement involves determining what roles and statuses the child will occupy in society. As discussed elsewhere, some of the statuses that a person will occupy are ascribed at birth, such as age, sex, and social class position. Children generally assume the legal, religious, and political status of their family as well. Even statuses that are achieved, such as marriage, occupation, and education, are greatly influenced by one's membership in a particular family or kin network.

The family also performs functions other than the five mentioned (i.e., socialization, affection and emotional support, sexual regulation, reproduction, and social placement). It fulfills basic economic, protective, educational, recreational, and religious functions as well.

12.4 The Conflict Perspective on the Family

Conflict theorists, like functionalists, recognize variations in family structure and accept the idea that the family provides for basic social needs and fulfills basic social goals. However, the two approaches are otherwise fundamentally different. Conflict theorists contend that social systems, including the family, are not static structures that maintain equilibrium and harmony among the parts. They argue,

instead that social systems are constantly in a state of conflict and change. They contend that conflict is natural and inevitable in all human interactions, including between people of different genders, spouses, and parents and children, and that these conflicts are the result of a continual struggle for power and control. Marriage is one of many contexts in which each person seeks his or her rights. The struggles of parenthood involve not just rivalries among siblings but also between parents and children.

Conflict stems from the unequal distribution of scarce resources. In all systems, some have more resources than others, which gives them dominance and power over others. Feminist theories, like conflict theories, argue that inequalities exist not only in the economic and occupational realm but also in the family. Friedrich Engels (1902) claimed that the family, the basic unit in a capitalist society, serves as the chief means of oppressing women. The husband is the bourgeois, the wife the proletariat. As general Marxist-feminist theory suggests, when women become aware of their collective interests, they will question the legitimacy of the existing patterns of inequality and will join together against men to bring about changes and the redistribution of resources: power, money, education, job opportunities, and the like. Conflict is as inevitable in the family as it is in society, and it leads to change.

Conflict theory assumes that economic organization, especially the ownership of property, generates revolutionary class conflict. In families, property ownership involves not just one's home and possessions but people as well. Coltrane and Collins (2001) argue that basic to the institution of sexual stratification is the notion of *sexual property*, the belief that one has permanent exclusive sexual rights to a particular person. In societies operating under a system of patriarchy (dominated by males), the principal form of sexual property is male ownership of females, husband ownership of wives.

This pattern of male ownership and male dominance has a long history, dating back to laws in ancient Hebrew society or perhaps even further and continuing through the 20th century. The Hebrew laws stated, among other things, that if a man had sexual intercourse with an *unbetrothed* (not contracted for marriage) virgin, he was required to marry her and to pay her father the bride price. In many societies, women are closely guarded so they will not attract other men and lose their "market value." These practices are reflected in such customs as wearing a veil and strict chaperonage. Even in the United States, women could legally be denied credit until the passage of the Equal Credit Opportunity Act in 1974, and women are still not guaranteed equal rights under the US Constitution. The status of women is also evident in many wedding ceremonies, in which the father "gives away" the bride—as though she were his property—and the bride vows to honor and obey the groom (her new "owner").

How can this inequality and the prevalence of male domination be explained? The most common theory relates power and domination to available resources. The idea is that men gain power over women through their physical strength and their freedom from the biological limitations of childbirth and that the traditional resource of women is their sexuality. Before and during marriage, the argument goes, women would control men by giving or withholding sex.

Conflict theory suggests that the structure of domination shifts as resources shift. In general, those with greater occupational prestige, higher income, or more education have more power. Women who bear children, it could be argued, gain status, prestige, and power because they are fulfilling the important role of mother.

However, realistically, exactly the opposite happens. A woman's power declines with the birth of a child and goes down even more with additional children. Why? Women with children are more likely to be confined to the home, with the primary responsibilities of child care, and do not have the time or the liberty to acquire resources such as education, income, or the type of job that would increase their power. Logically, we can argue, we might expect women today to be in better bargaining positions relative to men because they are having fewer children and are more likely hold jobs. Freedom from unwanted pregnancies and childbirth, combined with increased education and income, lessens their economic dependence on husbands. The result today is that there seems to be a major trend, at least in the more industrialized nations, toward greater equality between the sexes—both within and outside of marriage and the family.

Sociology Students in Real Life

Cathy Coker Fernandez

Graduating class: 2002



Cathy Coker Fernandez

Favorite sociology course: “Intro to Sociology, Sociology of Crime.”

How has sociology helped you in your job or in your life? “I am a middle school social studies teacher. I currently teach sixth grade World Cultures and Geography. I draw from my sociology background on a daily basis as a teacher. It allows me to see the larger systemic picture, the social institution of education as a whole and how it is structured, instead of solely focusing on the four walls surrounding my classroom.”

Conflict in families also occurs over issues other than inequality between men and women. It can arise over things like place of residence, inheritance rights, decision-making, selection of mates, violence (especially rape), sexual relationships, and marital adjustment, to mention a few examples. In every instance, the issue is likely to involve an inequality of power, authority, or resources, which has led to the conflict. This means that familial conflicts are not necessarily due to personality clashes but rather to inequality—such as a power imbalance in a relationship.

It is important for married people and marriage counselors to understand this when trying to work on troubled relationships. It may be more important to adjust the balance of power between spouses than to adjust personalities that are thought to be incompatible. These ideas may be useful for you even if you are not currently married. If you have a significant other, consider your relationship with that person. Can you think of any instances in which an imbalance of power has led

to a disagreement? This does not necessarily mean that there was a loss of affection for one another—although that may be the case. Instead, it may reflect an underlying inequality in the relationship.

12.5 Other Perspectives on the Family

12.5a The Exchange Perspective

All human interactions, including those between spouses or parents and children, can be viewed in terms of social exchange. Social exchange theory assumes that people weigh rewards and costs in their social interactions. If the exchange is unequal, or is perceived as unequal, one person will be at a disadvantage and the other will control the relationship. In this regard, exchange theory parallels the conflict perspective. If people in a relationship give a great deal and receive little in return, they will perceive the relationship as unsatisfactory. These ideas can be illustrated with mate selection.

Everywhere in the world, selecting a mate involves trying to get the best spouse possible for what one has to offer. As you know from our earlier discussion of the endogamous and exogamous rules of marriage, selecting a mate is never a matter of completely free and independent choice. One must conform to societal norms.

Marriages may be arranged in several ways. At one extreme, they may be organized by the families of the people to be married; the prospective spouses may have no say in the matter at all. When this practice is followed, the criteria of the exchange include such factors as money, prestige, family position, and power. When, on the other hand, the people to be married choose their mates themselves, the exchange criteria involve factors such as love, affection, emotional support, beauty, personality, prestige, and fulfillment of needs. The latter procedure is less common in the world as a whole, the United States being one of the countries that practices it.

One of the most widely researched exchange theories of mate selection is the theory of **complementary needs**. Robert Winch believed that although mates tend to resemble each other in such social characteristics as age, race, religion, ethnic origin, socioeconomic status, and education, they are usually complementary rather than similar in respect to needs, psychic fulfillment, and individual motivation (Winch et al., 1954; Winch, 1958). Rather than seeking a mate with a similar personality, one seeks a person who will satisfy one's needs. If both people are dominant, for example, the relationship may not succeed. However, if one is dominant and the other submissive, the relationship is complementary and the needs of both parties are met. A great deal of research was instigated by this theory of complementary needs, but the results did not provide empirical support for the notion that people choose mates whose needs complement their own.

An earlier exchange theory of mate selection was Willard Waller's (1938) analysis of courtship conduct as a process of bargaining, exploitation, or both. In his words, "When one marries, he makes a number of different bargains. Everyone knows this and this knowledge affects the sentiment of love and the process of falling in love" (p. 239). Although it is doubtful that only he "makes bargains" or that "everyone knows this," the fact that bargaining and exchanges take place for both spouses in the mate selection process is today widely recognized and accepted. Good looks, athletic

Complementary needs

A theory of mate selection based on the idea that people marry those who provide the maximum need gratification, where needs tend to be complementary rather than similar

stardom, a sense of humor, clothes, and money are resources commonly perceived as valuable in the exchange process. In mate selection, as in other interaction processes, people rarely get something for nothing—although each person—either consciously or unconsciously—tries to maximize gains and minimize costs. Over the long run, however, actual exchanges tend to be about equal; if they are not, the relationship is likely to end.

Like conflict theory, exchange theory helps us recognize the importance of equality in a marriage and may be a useful perspective in dealing with troubled marriages. If a relationship is in trouble, counselors or therapists might try to evaluate the balance of exchange. They might find there is more of a balanced exchange than is apparent. If that were the case, they could explain to the couple the resources each partner provides. If there were, indeed, an imbalance, the clinician would recognize that this is likely to be a major source of trouble and may help the couple find ways to attain a balanced exchange. Here, again, is a perspective you can use to examine some of your own relationships—even if you are not married.

12.5b The Interactionist Perspective

The interactionist perspective on the family uses a social psychological approach to examine interaction patterns, socialization processes, role expectations and behaviors, and the definitions or meanings given to various family issues. This approach considers not just structural variations but also the interactional patterns and covert definitions associated with structural arrangements.

Few relationships are more enduring or more intense than marriage, and few reflect the principles of interactionism so comprehensively. Marriage exemplifies the central ideas of symbolic interaction: shared meanings, significant others, role expectations, role-taking, definitions of situations, symbolic communication, and so on.

Marriage is dynamic—the needs of the married individuals and their role relationships change frequently. According to the interactionist perspective, spouses have a reciprocal influence on each other. Each partner continually affects the other, so adjustment is a process—not an end result. Good adjustment means “the individual or the pair has a good working arrangement with reality, adulthood, and expectations of others” (Waller & Hill, 1951, p. 363).

All of us bring to a marriage certain ideas about what is proper behavior for our spouses and ourselves. Inevitably, as people interact, they find that some behaviors do not fit their preconceived definitions. Unless the definitions or the behaviors change, one spouse or both may be frustrated in attempting to fulfill their roles. Some argue that these frustrations are increasing because the roles of spouses today are more flexible and diverse than the traditional roles of “husband” and “wife.” Others maintain that today’s increased flexibility and diversity *decrease* marital strain by allowing partners a greater range of options. And still others argue that today’s roles are still not flexible or diverse enough, leaving working wives and mothers overwhelmed as they continue to be regarded as primarily responsible for house-keeping and child rearing. In any case, what the interactionist considers important is that spouses share definitions, perceptions, and meanings. Also, disagreements may not lead to conflict if they involve issues considered unimportant. Suppose, for example, that a wife likes football but her husband does not. The situation will not

lead to conflict if the husband defines football as something that is important to his wife and accepts her behavior. In the same way, one spouse's desire to seek only part-time employment or to avoid cooking is a source of conflict only if the other spouse has different expectations. Adjustment is a result of shared expectations.

To maintain a satisfactory relationship, married couples must continually redefine themselves in relation to each other, which is often an unconscious process. When problems arise, marriage counseling may help by bringing unconscious definitions into consciousness, allowing the couple to examine how each of them influences the relationship.

The interactionist perspective stresses the importance of analyzing marriages and other relationships in the context in which they occur. A definition, role expectation, or behavior that is appropriate in one setting may be inappropriate in another. This perspective also emphasizes the notion that a successful marriage involves a process of adjustment, or continual adaptation to shifts in shared meaning.

Interactionism, therefore, is a particularly useful perspective for marital therapy. The family is not simply a group of separate people independently performing separate functions. The interactionist perspective helps us realize that family members act largely based on how they interpret one another's actions. Using the interactionist perspective, clinicians may come to understand that each family has its own context that provides the basis for interactions and interpretations of each family member's actions. This being the case, a clinician using this perspective might work on making sure the individual family members understand clearly what the other family members' intentions are and might also help to clarify how each person defines the actions of the others.



(Adobe Stock)

Married couples must continually redefine themselves in relation to each other; marriage counseling may help.

12.5c The Developmental Perspective

The developmental perspective on the family suggests that families pass through a family life cycle, each stage of which involves different interaction patterns, responsibilities, roles, and tasks. This perspective suggests that success at each stage in the cycle is essential for success in later stages; failure in earlier tasks leads to increased difficulty in performing later ones. Just as individuals must learn to crawl and then walk before they can run, new families must be able to perform various financial, sexual, and interpersonal tasks to maintain the family unit and meet later developmental goals. The number of stages identified depends on the intent of the researcher, but the most typical number is seven. Transition points between stages most often center on the age of the oldest child.

The first stage typically begins with marriage and extends to the birth of the first child. For most couples, this stage involves defining the marital relationship, learning to communicate effectively and resolve conflicts, working out mutually

satisfying and realistic systems for getting and spending the family income, and deciding about parenthood. Obviously, not all newlyweds face the same tasks. If a woman is pregnant before marriage, if the marriage is a teenage, interracial, or second marriage, or if the couple lived together before marriage, their concerns may differ. Nevertheless, the first stage of the family life cycle typically focuses on the married couple and their adjustment to life as a married pair.

For couples who choose to have children, the stages are enumerated as follows. Stage two may involve a child between birth and age 5; this stage can also be subdivided into families with an infant or toddler and families with a child in preschool. During this stage, the couple changes from a dyad to a triad. The central tasks of this stage would then be adjusting to parenthood, dealing with the needs and development of the child, relating to the child's grandparents (one's parents and in-laws), managing additional housing and space needs, and continuing the communicative, sexual, and financial responsibilities described in stage one.

Stage three may extend from the time the oldest child begins school to when that child becomes a teen. When children enter school, both parents and children face new relationships and responsibilities. In this stage, the family focuses on the education and socialization of children. The increasing significance of peer relationships, children's changing interests and activities, and the management of parent-child conflicts are added to ongoing marital, work, and other responsibilities. A second or third child, the loss of a job, or the dissolution of the marriage modifies the responsibilities generally associated with this stage.

Stage four is the family with adolescents or teenagers. At the adolescent stage, the family may undergo economic problems. Medical and dental costs, food, clothing, transportation, entertainment, education, and other expenses often place a strain on the budget. For many families, such issues as drinking, drugs, and sex become additional sources of strain. New trends in adolescent dancing, music, fashion, and slang must also be accommodated. In addition, families in this stage begin to prepare their teenager to be launched from the home.

Stage five begins when the oldest child leaves home and is frequently called the launching stage. The young person's departure—to marry, to attend college, or to take a full-time job—creates a significant transition for parents and child. This stage may be very brief, such as in a family with only one child who marries upon graduation from high school, or it may extend over many years. When all the children have been launched, the family returns to the original conjugal dyad; the modified extended family structure, however, may expand to include sons- or daughters-in-law and grandchildren.

Stage six is the period when all the children have left home; this is called the "empty-nest stage." It starts with the departure of the last child from the home and continues until retirement or the death of one spouse. As with stage five, this stage may be very brief, such as when a couple waits to have children until later in life or when children live at home for an extended period of time, or it may last years. At this stage, the interpersonal focus returns to the married couple, although new intergenerational family responsibilities can arise. Spouses in this stage may have some responsibility for their parents, who may be elderly, and also for their married children and their grandchildren, who may seek emotional and financial support from the middle generation from time to time.

The seventh and final stage generally begins with retirement and extends until the marriage ends with the death of one spouse. In heterosexual marriages, women are usually the surviving spouse because they live longer than men and are typically a couple years younger than their husbands. With the death of both spouses, the life cycle for that family has ended—and the cycle continues with each successive generation.

The stages of the family life cycle can be used to analyze a wide range of behaviors and interaction patterns. Frequency of sexual relations, income patterns, recreational activities, and interactions with children have been found to differ by the stage of the family life cycle. Olson and McCubbin (1983), for example, used a seven-stage family lifecycle model to study how 1,140 families managed their lives and why they succeeded in some areas more than in others. One finding consistent with other studies was that adults' satisfaction with marriage and family tends to decline between the birth of the first child and that child's adolescence and to rise as the children are launched from the nest. One explanation for the dramatic increase in satisfaction following the launching stage concerns the relaxation of sex roles between the parents. Women, in particular, may see themselves as freer to look for work and organizational roles outside the home.

Thinking Sociologically

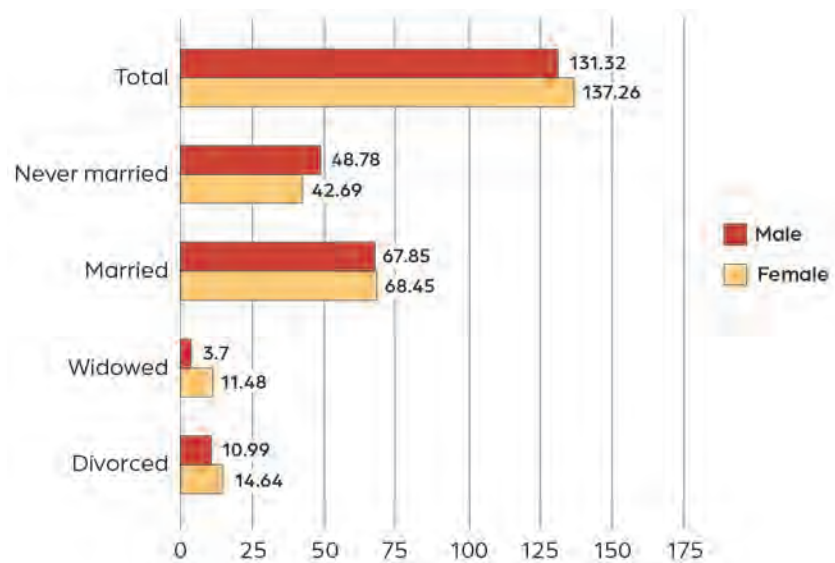
1. Apply the exchange perspective to several close relationships in your life. What did you have to offer, and in return, what did you receive? Can you identify instances in which an unequal relationship led to the termination of the relationship?
2. Suppose you are a sociologist who is called upon to testify as an expert witness in a child custody case. This is a case in which the father wants a joint custody arrangement but the mother objects and wants sole custody of the child. Assume there is no violence or any other urgent reason to keep the child away from the father. Develop an argument for or against joint custody, using any of or all the theories just covered.

12.6 The Family System in the US

As indicated earlier in this chapter, the US family system emphasizes monogamy, neolocal residence, a modified extended family structure, bilateral descent and inheritance, egalitarian decision-making, endogamous marriage, and relatively free choice of mate. A number of other structural characteristics have also been described—for example, families in the US tend to be small and rather isolated when compared with families in other countries. Marital and family roles for all genders are becoming increasingly ambiguous. We tend to emphasize love in mate selection, and we are often sexually permissive prior to or outside of marriage. In addition, divorce is granted easily.

Figure 12-4 shows the marital status of the population by sex and age. You can see that as of 2022, the population of the United States included over 131 million males and nearly 137 million females age 15 and over. Approximately 37% of the males and 31% of the females were never married (up from 34% and 28%, respectively, in 2012). A relatively small number (around 3.7 million or 2.8%) of the males were widowers, compared with 11.5 million (or 8.4%) of the females who were widows. Much publicity is given to the breakup of marriages through divorce, but only 8.4% (down from 8.9% in 2012) of the males and 10.7% (down from 11.1% in 2012) of the females had a divorced status in 2022.

Figure 12-4 Marital Status of the United States Population in 2022, by Sex



Adapted from "Marital status of the United States population in 2022, by sex," by V. Korhonen, 2024b. *Statista*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/242030/marital-status-of-the-us-population-by-sex/>. Copyright 2024 by Statista.

Broad profiles of the sort given in the preceding paragraph, however, do not indicate frequency or range of specific trends in the evolution of the family. In the following sections, we examine some of these trends in more detail.

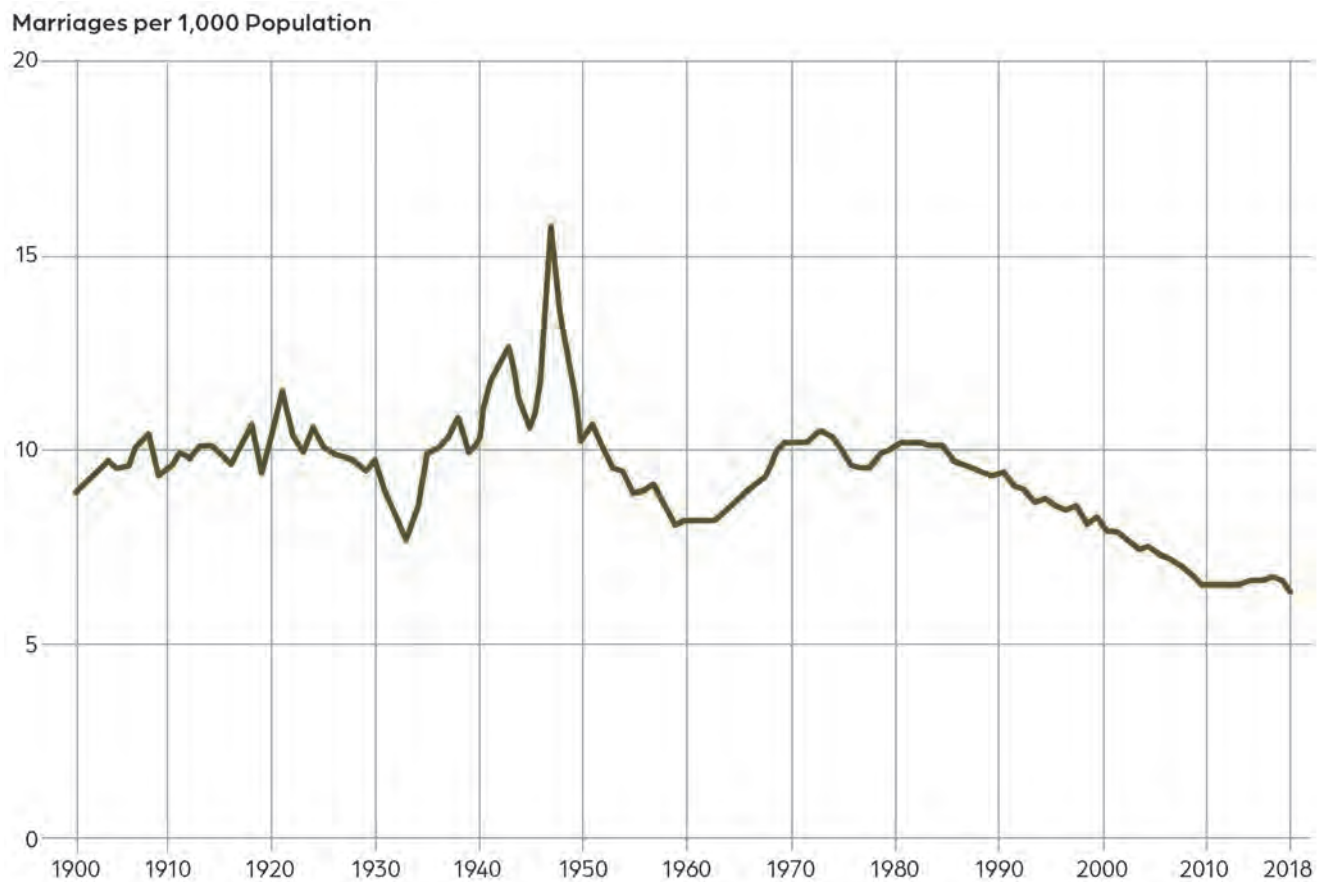
12.6a Marriage Rates and Age at Marriage

Rates of marriage (the number of people who marry in a given year per 1,000 people or sometimes per 1,000 unmarried women age 15 and over) are influenced by a variety of factors. The rate characteristically falls during periods of economic recession and rises during periods of prosperity. The rate also tends to rise at the beginning of a war and after a war has ended. Variations in the age of the population are also influential.

In the United States prior to 1900, the rate was relatively stable, averaging 9.6 marriages per 1,000 people per year. Shortly after the turn of the century, the rate rose until the Depression of the early 1930s, when it dropped to a low of 7.9.

Marriage rates rose dramatically at the outset of World War II, as young men sought to avail themselves of the deferred status granted to married men or simply wanted to marry before going overseas. The end of the war and the return of men to civilian life precipitated another upsurge in marriages. In 1946, the marriage rate reached 16.4, an unprecedented and to date unsurpassed peak (National Center for Health Statistics, 1973). Subsequently, it dropped. While there have been fluctuations, it has declined steadily since 1970. In 2009, the marriage rate was 6.8 per 1,000 population and dropped to 6.5 per 1,000 in 2018 (Curtin & Sutton, 2020). To demonstrate this trend, we can also look at the number of marriages per 1,000 unmarried women age 15 and over. Using the same general time period as the aforementioned rates, the rate of marriage per unmarried women age 15 and older in 1900 was 68.2, and was 31.2 in 2018 (Schweitzer, 2020b). Figures 12-5 and 12-6 illustrate both of the marriage rate measures.

Figure 12-5 Marriage Rates in the United States 1900-2018 per 1,000 Population



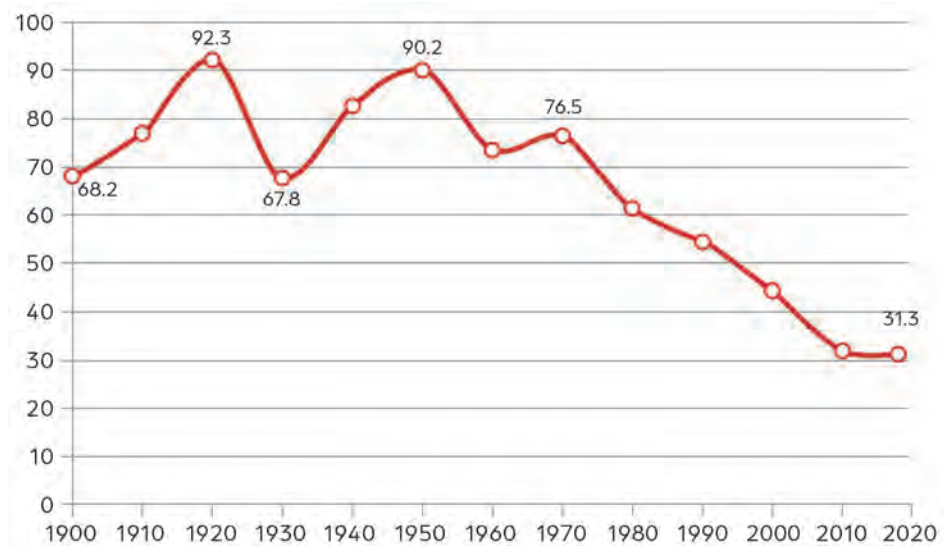
Notes: Rates are per 1,000 population. Data for Alaska start 1959, Hawaii in 1960. California was excluded in 1991, Louisiana in 2006, Georgia in 2013 and 2014.

Data source: NCHS, National Vital Statistics System, Marriage

Adapted from "Marriage Rates in the United States, 1900-2018," by S. C. Curtin and P. D. Sutton, 2020, *National Center for Health Statistics, Health E-Stats*.

https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hestat/marriage_rate_2018/marriage_rate_2018.pdf

Figure 12-6 Marriage Rates in the United States 1900 to 2018 per 1,000 Women Aged 15 and Over



Note: Data for Alaska start in 1959, Hawaii start in 1960.

Data sources: NCFMR analyses of data from the National Vital Statistics, CDC/NCHS, 1900–2000; U.S. Census Bureau 2000 Decennial Census; U.S. Census Bureau (IPUMS), American Community Survey, 2010 and 2018 (IPUMS).

Adapted from "Marriage: More than a century of change, 1900–2018," by V. Schweitzer, 2020, *Bowling Green State University, National Center for Family and Marriage Research*. <https://www.bgsu.edu/ncfmr/resources/data/family-profiles/schweitzer-marriage-century-change-1900-2018-fp-20-21.html>

In the United States, marriage rates have distinct seasonal and geographic variations. More marriages take place in October than in any other month, followed by September, June, and May. The fewest marriages are in January, February, and March. Most marriages take place on Saturdays. Tuesdays are the least popular (Kopf, 2016).

As an example of how to use sociological statistics, put yourself in the position of a business related to marriage—such as a florist, bridal boutique, tuxedo rental store, caterer, limousine service, or travel agent. Knowing the times of year that people prefer to get married could vastly help these businesses increase their success. This information could help businesses plan when and where to advertise, when to have the most personnel available to help potential customers, how to decorate the showrooms and arrange displays, and so forth.

Suppose that you are a travel agent and you know not only that October is the most popular time to get married but also that young people prefer it most. You might decorate your showroom with travel posters with young rather than middle-aged people in them, have a large number of low-priced packages available, perhaps have a young travel agent on duty, and advertise during the preceding months in the magazines that young people are most likely to read.

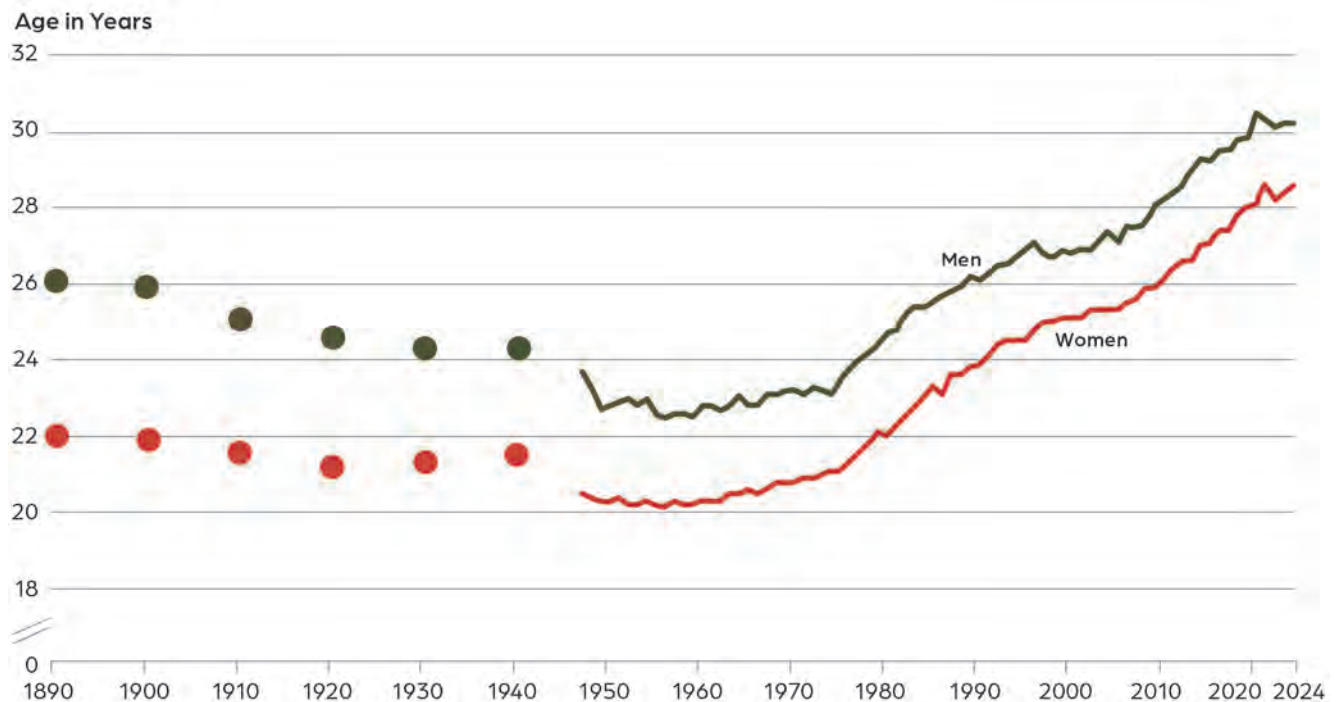
Statistics about when people get married could also be very useful to you in planning your own wedding. If most weddings occur in October, for example, it will be more difficult to reserve the specific time and place you want for your ceremony; the rates for caterers, limousines, travel, flowers, and tuxedo rentals are also likely to

be higher during a more popular time of year. Knowing this, you may want to start making your plans as early as possible, or you might decide to change the date of your wedding to a less popular month.

Most marriages in the United States are between people of roughly the same age—although people are free to marry someone considerably older or younger within the legal limits determined by each state. Surprisingly, median age at first marriage and the age difference between spouses have not varied much since the turn of the 20th century. In 1900, these figures were 25.9 for males and 21.9 for females—a difference of 4 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018a). The median age at first marriage in 2015 was 29.7 for men and 27.8 for women (Figure 12-7).

Figure 12-7 Median Age at First Marriage, 1890–2024

The following figure shows the median age of men and women when they were first married in the United States from 1890 to 2024. The median age for a man's first marriage was 30 years in 2024 up from 26 in 1990. The median age for a woman's first marriage was 28.3 years in 2024, up from 23.9 in 1990.

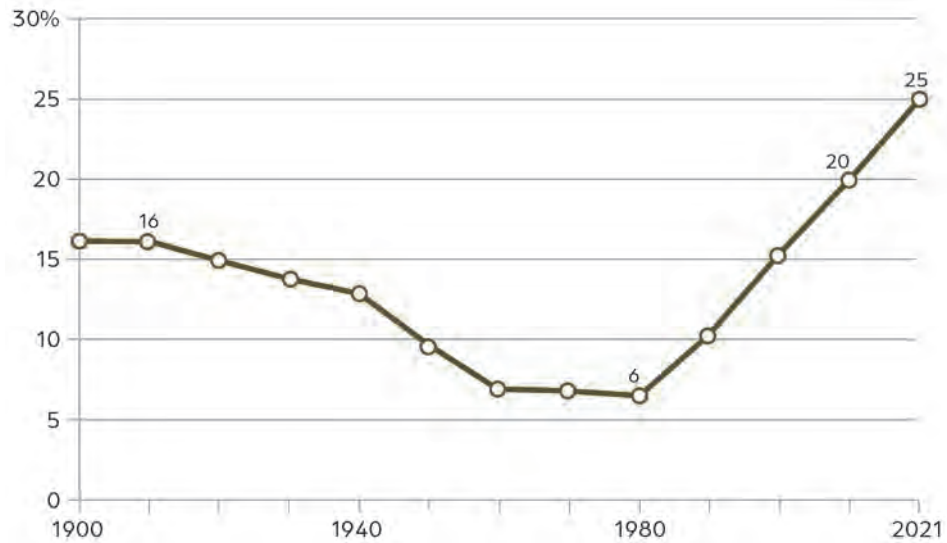


Notes: Starting in 2019, estimates for marriages include same-sex married couples and estimates for married individuals include same-sex married couples.

Data source: U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Censuses, 1890 to 1940, and Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 1947 to 2024.

Adapted from "Median age at first marriage: 1890 to present, Figure MS-2," *United States Census Bureau*, 2024. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/time-series/demo/families-and-households/ms-2.pdf>

Recently, people have been postponing marriage until they are older, which reflects a decision on the part of young people to live independently as they pursue higher education or job opportunities. Since 1980, there has been a rapid increase in the percentage Americans over 40 who have never been married. In 1980, 6% of Americans had never married; by 2021, this had increased to 25%, as shown in Figure 12-8 (Fry, 2023). Figure 12-9 illustrates that the percentage of never married adults varies widely by gender, race, and educational level.

Figure 12-8 Percent of 40-Year-Olds Who Have Never Married, 1900–2021

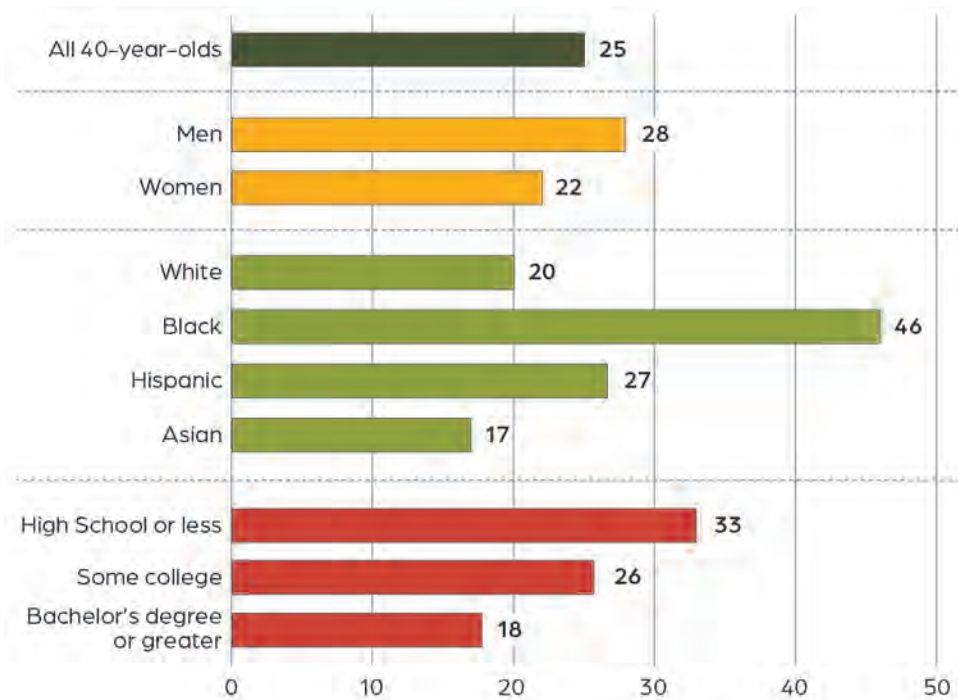
Note: Data labels are for years 1910, 1980, 2010, and 2021.

Data source: Pew Research Center analysis of 1900–2000 decennial census, and 2010 and 2021 American Community Survey (IPUMS).

Adapted from “A record-high share of 40-year-olds in the U.S. have never been married,” R. Fry, 2023, *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/06/28/a-record-high-share-of-40-year-olds-in-the-us-have-never-been-married/>. Copyright 2023 by Pew Research Center.

Teenage marriages are an issue of special concern in the United States. Married teenagers have an increased high school dropout rate and a high unemployment rate. The divorce rate for teenagers is estimated to be around 2 times higher than the rate for marriages that begin after age 20; 48% of teenage marriages are likely to end in divorce within 10 years as compared to 25% of those who marry after the age of 25. Interestingly, 60% of those who marry between 20 and 25 years of age will get divorced, but those who marry when they are 25 years or older are 24% less likely to divorce (Divorce.com Staff, 2024). More will be said of divorce later in this chapter. Many teenage marriages are preceded by a pregnancy (Hamilton, 2012). Data show a lower relationship satisfaction among marriages that follow the birth of a child (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009). In reference to his research on economically disadvantaged couples, Fein (2004) states: “Whereas the vast bulk of first transitions to parenthood among upper-middle-class couples *follow* first marriages, first births among disadvantaged newlyweds are far more likely to *precede* marriage” (emphasis added). Furthermore, among couples who married in 1990, 1/3 of those in the bottom education category had their first child before marriage, compared with 1/10 of those in the top education category. For Black people in the US, 60%–65% are more likely to delay marriage after a nonmarital birth compared to White mothers. This racial gap can be partially explained by economic, demographic, attitudinal factors, cohabitation patterns, educational attainment, poverty status, and attitudes of gender distrust (Daniels et al., 2017). Studies indicate that people who marry young, for a variety of reasons, are unprepared for the process of selecting a mate and assuming a marital role and are disproportionately represented in divorce statistics.

Figure 12-9 Percent of Never-Married Americans Over 40 by Gender, Race, and Education, 2021



Note: White, Black, and Asian adults are those who report as being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race. "Some college" includes those with associate degrees and those who attended college but did not obtain a degree.

Data source: Pew Research Center analysis of the 2021 American Community Survey (IPUMS)

Adapted from "A record-high share of 40-year-olds in the U.S. have never been married," R. Fry, 2023, *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/06/28/a-record-high-share-of-40-year-olds-in-the-us-have-never-been-married/>. Copyright 2023 by Pew Research Center.

12.6b Family Size

In this country, as in the rest of the world, many married couples have or want to have children. Voluntarily child-free marriages have traditionally been less common, but they are no longer as rare as they once were. In the United States, 28% of husband-wife households were without their own children in 2000 according to the U.S. Census Bureau (Lofquist et al., 2012). This percentage has increased slightly to 29.4% in 2023 (USAFacts Team, 2024b).



Many married couples have or want to have children.

(Adobe Stock)



Sociology *at Work*

Family Counseling

Marie Witkin Kargman (1914–2009) considered herself a clinical sociologist and obtained both

a law degree and a PhD in sociology. She was a family disputes mediator, a marriage counselor, a divorce counselor, and a family counselor. Kargman felt that her law degree and sociology degree offered a variable combination of skills for the type of work that she did.

Kargman told of a realization that she came to early in her career. “Before I trained in sociology at graduate school [Department of Social Relations, Harvard University], I was a practicing lawyer in the juvenile and family courts of Chicago. I discovered that the law is in a very real sense applied sociology: It deals with institutionalized patterns of behavior legitimized by the legal system, and with the sanctions applied when people deviate. I felt I needed to know more about the family, its structure, and its functions to be a better lawyer. Most lawyers rearrange the family, writing divorce and separation agreements that create new family structures, without knowing much about the sociology of the family. I was not comfortable rearranging family relationships when I knew so little theory in the field. However, by the time I got my sociology degree I knew that I wanted to be a marriage counselor who worked with lawyers, helping them do a better job.”

Using knowledge gained from her experience as a family counselor, disputes mediator, and sociologist, Kargman wrote a book called *How to Manage a Marriage*. In it, she explained that the family system must be viewed as a combination of subsystems: political, economic, and kinship systems. If a marriage is in trouble, she explains, people have a tendency to blame one another. The advice she offers is, “Attack the problematic subsystem within the family; attack the problem, not the person.”

Kargman explained how she applied her sociological knowledge. “In my family disputes mediation, and particularly in child custody disputes, I am apt to say to the divorced parents who have a child custody problem, ‘What we are trying to do here is to get two parents and their children to come together to carry out the family functions without the foundation of living in a joint household. Each household is a family group with a political system, an economic system, and a kinship system. The child must now live in two households, juggle two different sets of systems, integrate them, or deal with them as unrelated parts of his or her life.’ We then look at the similarities of expectation of the child’s two separate households, and try to decide what is in the best interests of the child.”

Kargman spoke of one particular case in which she was appointed by the court to represent a child in a custody case. The mother had asked the court for permission to take the child out of Massachusetts; she had remarried, and there were two additional children in the second marriage. This meant that there was an additional family involved besides the child’s original one. Because the mother wanted to move across the country with her new family, the question of reasonable visitation for the child’s father was in dispute. “Before I got into the dispute, the only persons discussed by the lawyers were the natural father, the natural mother, and the child. That the child was part of many different family relationships was never discussed. From a legal point of view, the family before the court was the original family of procreation. However, this child was a member of three families: his original family, the stepfamily, and the family of his half-sisters. The child wanted to spend holidays with ‘his family’ and the natural father wanted the holidays on a strict two-parent division. All of the child’s social systems were described in my report to the judge, whose decision was made based on the child’s multi-family expectations.”

Measuring the number of births and the population growth in a country is often done in terms of the “crude birth rate,” usually referred to simply as the *birth rate*. The birth rate is the number of births during a year per 1,000 population. In 1950 the birth rate in the United States was 24.3 per 1,000 population. By 1978 it had dropped precipitously to 14.8 per 1,000 population, rose slightly to 15.6 in 1990, and has declined steadily to 12 per 1,000 in 2024. The decline has levelled out and is projected to be 10.3 by 2100. Rates, such as birth rates, do not have much meaning

unless looked at comparatively. For social scientists, it is usually the variation in rates that is more helpful than the rates in and of themselves. When significant variations occur, such as the change in the birth rate between 1950 and 1978, this indicates to social scientists that there are factors that led to the change that should be explored. Like marriage rates, birth rates fluctuate with wars, socioeconomic conditions, and other variables.

Figure 12-10 US Birth Rate 1950–2024 and Projected to 2100



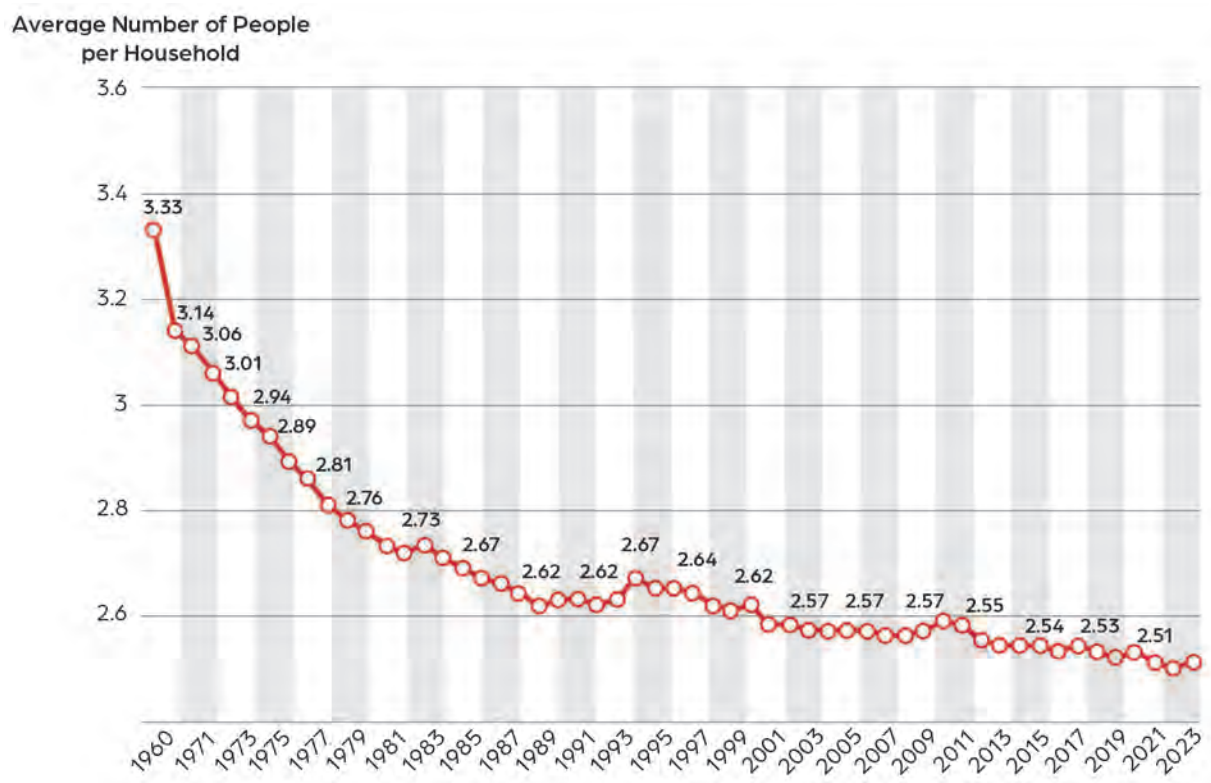
Data source: United Nations – World Population Prospects

Adapted from "U.S. Birth Rate 1950–2024," *Macrotrends*, 2024. <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/USA/united-states/birth-rate>. Copyright 2010–2025 by Macrotrends LLC.

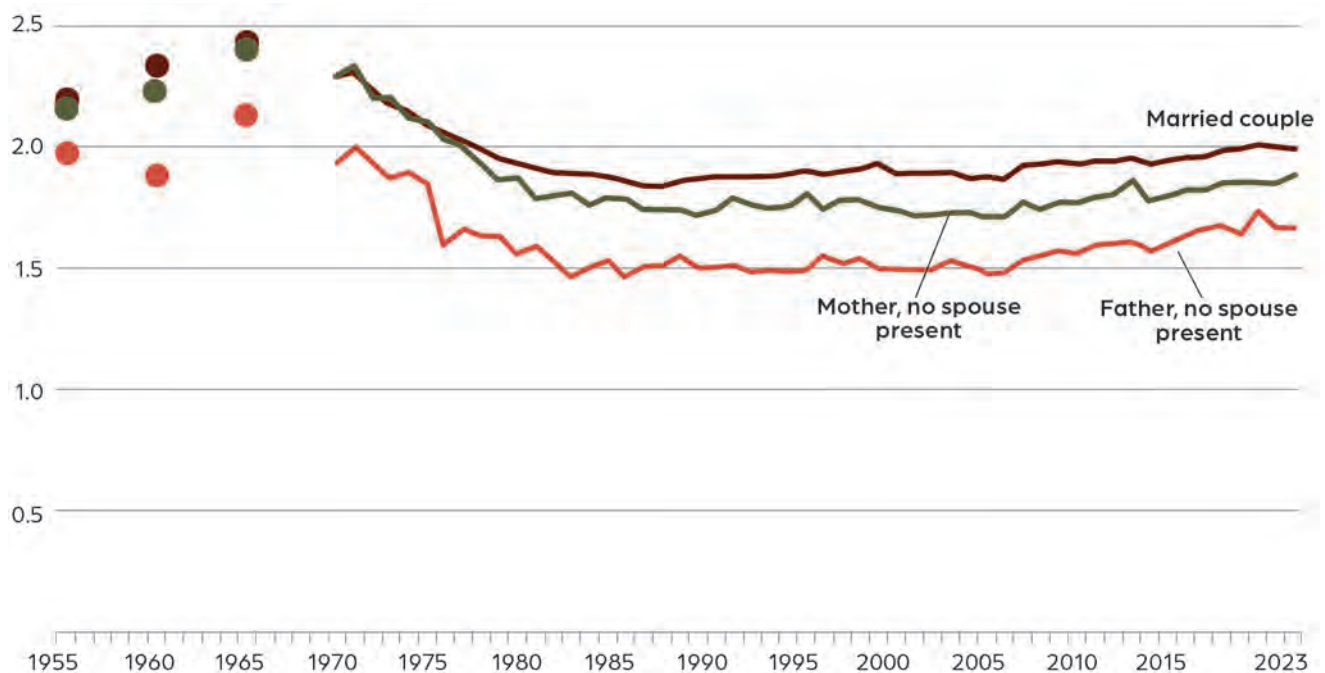
The "baby boom" period of the late 1940s and the 1950s produced an unanticipated but significant rise in the United States birth rate. It may have been caused by increases in the normative pressures on women to have children, the end of the disruption brought about by war, postwar economic prosperity, or the long-term psychological effects of growing up during the Great Depression. Bean (1983) states that while social and cultural conditions during the era supported having families, increased costs tended to discourage couples from having large families. Thus, only a minor part of the baby boom can be attributed to families deciding to have three or more children.

In 1965, the average number of children under 18 for married couples was 2.44; in 2023 it was 1.99 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024b). Improved methods of birth control, liberalized abortion laws, and a widespread acceptance of family planning measures have decreased the number of unplanned and unwanted births and have enabled couples to have the number of children they want. Because the abortion debate has become so politicized and ambiguous, with laws varying on the federal level and among states based upon political leadership, it is difficult to predict how laws surrounding abortion will affect the birth rate. U.S. Census Bureau figures emphasize that over the last decades of the 20th century, the size of US families has declined steadily. The average size of households has declined from 3.3 in 1960 to 2.51 in 2023 (Korhonen, 2024a) (see Figure 12–11). The trend in the US can also be seen in other countries throughout the world; the world fertility rate has decreased from 4.86 in 1950 to 2.31 in 2024 (O'Neill, 2024).

Figure 12–11 Average Number of People Per Household in the US, 1960–2023



Adapted from "The average American household consisted of 2.51 people in 2023," by V. Korhonen, 2024c, *Statista*. Retrieved December 9, 2024, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/183648/average-size-of-households-in-the-us/>. Copyright 2024 by Statista.

Figure 12-12 Number of Own Children Per Family, 1955–2023

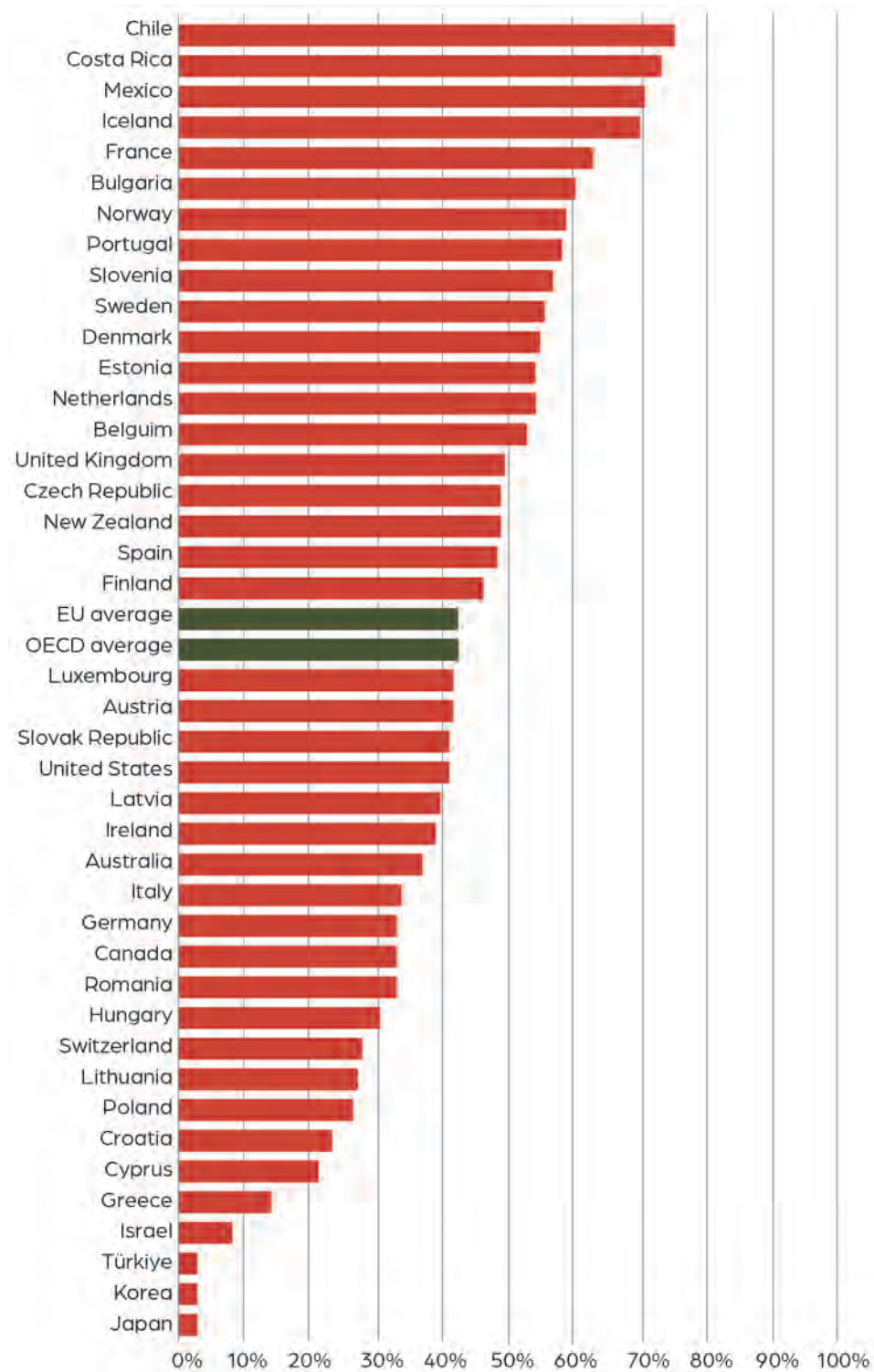
Note: Children are under age 18.

Data sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 1955, 1960, 1965, and 1970–2023.

Adapted from "Average number of own children per family, Figure FM-3," *U.S. Census. Historical Families Tables*, 2024. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/time-series/demo/families-and-households/fm-3.pdf>

Does family size make a difference in interactions among siblings or between children and their parents? Because families are groups and the number of people in a group influences the behavior of its members, the answer is “yes.” Specifically, how does family size make a difference? Perhaps the greatest difference in family interaction patterns comes with the birth of the first child because the transition to parenthood involves a major shift in role expectations and behaviors. A number of writers have called the early stages of parenthood a “crisis,” a traumatic change that forces couples to drastically reorganize their lives (Hobbs, 1965; LeMasters, 1957). Later studies concluded, however, that for most couples, beginning parenthood is a period of transition but not a period of change so dramatic that it should be termed a crisis.

With the birth of the first child, the expectation exists that a second and third child should follow. Families with only one child have generally been viewed as unhealthy for parents and child alike. The “only” child has been described as spoiled, selfish, overly dependent, and lonely. Parents of a single child have been described as selfish and hardly parents at all. Research findings, however, do not support these descriptions.

Figure 12-13 Births Outside of Wedlock by Country, 2019 and 2020

Note: The green bars are the averages of the EU and OECD countries.

Adapted from "The Structure of Families," Fertility indicators, SF2.4 Share of births outside of marriage, n.d., *OECD Family Database*. <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/oecd-family-database.html>

Findings generally tend to support the claims made by Blake (1981a, 1981b, 1989), including that single children are intellectually superior, have no obvious personality defects, tend to consider themselves happy, and are satisfied with the important aspects of life, notably jobs and health. In fact, Blake's research supports the *dilution hypothesis*, which predicts that, on average, the more children a family has, the less each child will achieve in such areas as educational and occupational attainment. That is, there is a dilution of familial resources available for children in large families and a concentration of such resources in small ones. These diluted resources include the parents' time, emotional and physical energy (consider the impact frequent pregnancy might have on a mother's emotional and physical energy), attention, personal interaction, and material resources that allow for personal living space and privacy within the home, better neighborhoods surrounding the home, specialized medical and dental care, travel, and specialized instruction, such as music lessons.

These findings are extremely important for you to consider in planning your own families. Would you be more receptive to having just one child knowing that "only" children do as well as—or better than—children with siblings? Would you be less willing to have a large number of children knowing about the dilution hypothesis? While the consequences of having few or many children have important implications for personal decision-making, many other factors also enter into the decision of how many children you may want or have, including age at marriage, religious orientation, effective use of contraception, career pattern, and so forth. Beyond personal decision-making, the implications of family size also impact social policy.

Although people may agree that a family with only one child is small, there is less agreement about the number of children required for a family to be considered "large." Perceptions of family size are relative. A family with four children in the United States at the turn of the century would not have been perceived as large. However, today, it generally would be. More relevant than general perceptions about family size, however, are concerns regarding the consequences of having more children *in a given family*.

It is known that family size increases with factors such as younger ages at marriage, lower educational and socioeconomic levels, and rural residence. Certain religious groups, such as the Amish and the Mormons, place a higher value on having many children and tend to have large families. One review of the effects of family size (Wagner et al., 1985) showed that in larger families, child rearing becomes more rule ridden and less individualized. There is more corporal punishment and there are fewer resources to invest per child. Smaller families tend to result in higher IQ, academic achievement, and occupational performance. Large families produce more delinquents and alcoholics. Regarding health, in large families, *peri-natal* (surrounding birth), *morbidity* (injury and illness), and *mortality* (death) rates are higher, and mothers are at higher risk from several physical diseases.

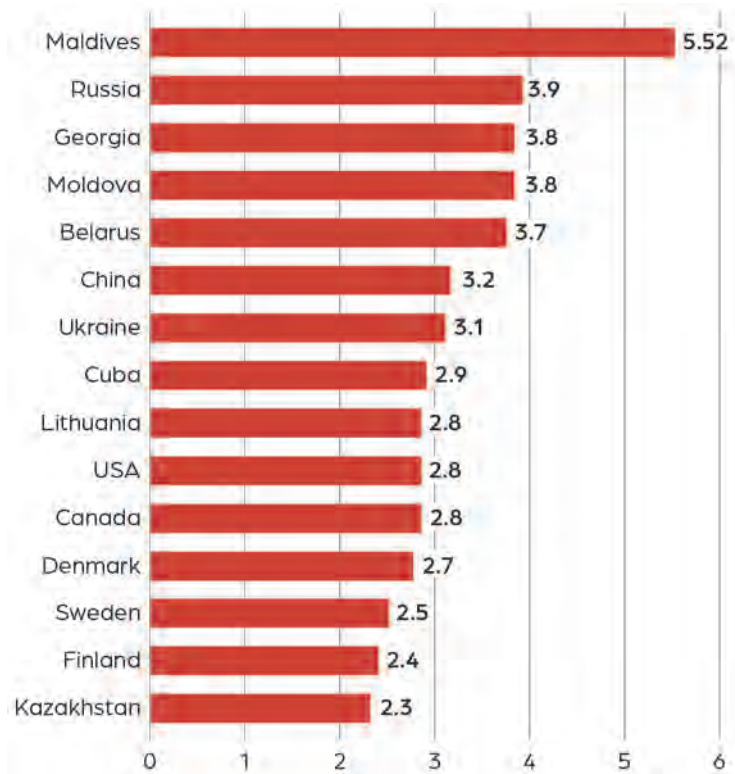
Large families heighten the complexity of intragroup relations, pose problems in fulfilling family needs, and influence how much money and attention can be devoted to each child.

12.6c Divorce

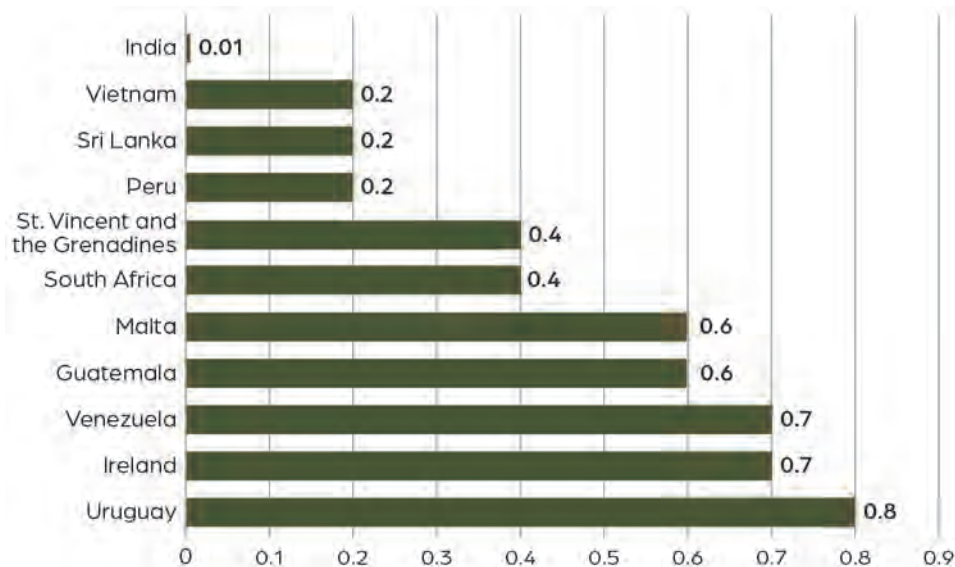
Whenever two people interact, conflicts may arise, and one person or both may want to end the relationship. This is true not only of marriage but of other relationships as well. Unlike most relationships, however, marriage involves civil, legal, and possibly religious ties that specify if and how the relationship can end. In countries with strong Roman Catholic traditions such as Ireland, Brazil, and Peru, divorce has traditionally been extremely difficult to obtain and is also highly discouraged by society in general. In Switzerland, the Scandinavian countries, Poland, Russia, and several other countries, a divorce is granted if it is shown that the marriage has failed. The “triple talaq,” a practice in some Muslim communities (especially in India), traditionally gave a husband the power to terminate his marriage by simply stating the word *talaq* three times (orally or in written form). In this country, most states have traditionally granted a divorce if it is shown that one party has gravely violated his or her marital obligations. Since 1970, many states have moved to a no-fault divorce system, in which marriages can be ended based on what are commonly called “irreconcilable differences.” Why are our divorce rates so high in this country? Experts agree that there are six main reasons why this is so today (Macionis, 2012):

1. Individualism—families are spending less and less time together and are more concerned with personal happiness.
2. Romantic love subsides. The excitement goes away.
3. Women are less dependent on men. They now have careers of their own.
4. Stressful relationships are a contributing factor, especially if both spouses work outside of the home.
5. Divorce is now more socially acceptable.
6. Divorce is now easier to legally obtain.

Even though the crude divorce rate in the US has declined to 2.8 per 1,000 it is still one of the highest in the world (see Figure 12-14). While the Maldives had by far the highest crude divorce rate, measured at nearly 5.52 divorces per 1,000 people in 2024, followed by Russia, Georgia, and Moldova (3.9, 3.8 and 3.8, respectively), the US, Lithuania, and Canada also ranked among the countries with the highest rates, all at around 2.8 per 1,000 in 2024. At the other end of the spectrum, in 2024, India had by far the lowest recent crude divorce rate of all the countries measured, at a rate of .01 per 1,000 population. Vietnam, Sri Lanka, and Peru were also among the countries with the lowest rates in recent years, each with a rate of .2 per 1,000 population.

Figure 12-14 Countries with the Highest Divorce Rates

Adapted from "Divorce Rates in the World: Divorce Rates by Country," by Divorce.com staff, 2024. <https://divorce.com/blog/divorce-rates-in-the-world/#countriesWiththeHighestDivorceRate>

Figure 12-15 Countries with the Lowest Divorce Rates

Adapted from "Divorce Rates in the World: Divorce Rates by Country," by Divorce.com staff, 2024. <https://divorce.com/blog/divorce-rates-in-the-world/#countriesWiththeLowestDivorceRate>

Why, then, do we so often hear that one marriage in two ends in divorce? The divorce rate is figured by dividing the number of divorces in a given year by the number of marriages in the same year. For example, in 2016 in the US, there were 2,245,404 marriages and 827,261 divorces or annulments. Dividing the number of divorces by the number of marriages for that year gives a divorce rate of 36.8%, or more than 1 in 3. This is the rate used to illustrate the “breakdown in the American family.” It does not, however, provide proof that half of all marriages end in divorce—any more than a community that had 100 marriages and 100 divorces in a given year would prove that *all* marriages end in divorce. Few of the divorces that take place in a given year are of the marriages that took place that same year. Rather, they were probably from marriages that occurred years earlier. Approximately 22% of marriages end in divorce after 5 years of marriage while another 36% are divorced by the 10th year (or 32% cumulatively) (Mason, 2024). There is, nevertheless, a great deal of concern about the frequency of divorce in the United States. As stated earlier, the divorce rate in the US in 2024 was 2.8 per 1,000 population; even though it is still one of the highest rates in the world, it has decreased from 5.3 per 1,000 population in 1979–1981 (Feinleib, 1991). Divorce rates take on a vastly different perspective when based on the number per 1,000 population. This tells you that it is critically important to understand how various rates are computed—not only when looking at divorce but also when looking at other statistics presented in the media.

Like marriage rates, divorce rates tend to decline in times of economic depression and rise during periods of prosperity. They also vary by geographic and social characteristics. Geographically, the general trend in the United States has traditionally been that divorce rates increased as one moved from east to west. Demographic figures show that more than one-half of all divorces are among those in their late 20s and early 30s. While the total number of marriages is smaller, the divorce rate is exceptionally high among those who marry as teenagers. Divorce is also most frequent within the first 3 years of marriage, and the incidence is higher among lower socioeconomic levels. Whether education, occupation, or income is used as an index of socioeconomic level, the divorce rate goes up as the socioeconomic level goes down.

The U.S. Census Bureau released a report in 2011 stating that divorce rates were highest in the South and lowest in the Northeast (Bernstein & Tilman, 2011). Rates in the South still tend to be higher than the national average. Do Southerners just have a harder time getting along? A true sociological explanation would look for trends and patterns. Experts cite low household incomes, the tendency to marry at younger ages, and religious beliefs that allow divorce as major factors in producing such a high divorce rate.

Variations in the rate of divorce give us clues about its causes. People who get married in their teens are likely to be divorced within 10 years, and people who get married between ages 20 and 25 have a 60% chance of getting divorced. Difficulties in adjusting to new relationships or discrepancies in role expectations may contribute to the divorce rates seen within the first 3 years of marriage. Money problems, lack of education, and working in a low-status job may account for the rates found in the lower socioeconomic levels. Although other factors are involved, and there are some exceptions to these general patterns, divorce is not merely a result of personal characteristics. These variations illustrate how social and cultural factors can influence the chances that a marriage will end in divorce. Since the mid-1990s, a few states have enacted laws providing for “covenant marriages.” Couples who

marry under the category of a covenant marriage are voluntarily choosing to make divorce more difficult to obtain in the future. Once a couple has chosen the covenant marriage option, they give up the right to divorce under the no-fault system in the state where they were married. In covenant marriages, cause for divorce is usually limited to domestic violence, a felony conviction with jail time, or adultery. The movement to create covenant marriages was driven by conservative Christians who were alarmed by the rising US divorce rate. As of 2019, three states offer the covenant marriage option: Louisiana, Arkansas, and Arizona.

Thinking Sociologically

1. Research suggests many advantages of small families over large ones. Can you think of ways that large families may be advantageous over small ones?
2. How would you explain the tremendous variations in divorce rates (a) between one country or society and another; (b) between one religious or ethnic group and another within the same country (such as the United States or Canada); and (c) over time?

12.7 Nontraditional Marital and Family Lifestyles

In the United States today, many people are choosing alternatives to the “traditional” *family* that consisted of a husband, a wife, and two or more children. In previous generations, the husband was typically the authority and the primary, if not sole, wage earner; the wife, by contrast, was usually submissive to the husband and served as primary caregiver and homemaker. Now, however, the diversity of families in this country is greater than ever before, and changes are occurring rapidly. Next, four nontraditional approaches to family life are discussed in more detail: (1) nonmarital cohabitation, (2) childfree marriage, (3) one-parent families, and (4) dual-career marriages.

12.7a Nonmarital Cohabitation

Nonmarital cohabitation, or living together, is when two adults who are not related or married to each other occupy the same dwelling as a couple in an intimate relationship or partnership. While such households may not fit a traditional definition of “family,” families can also be defined in terms of intimate relationships and sexual bonds, as is the case in cohabitation. These nonmarital unions attracted a great deal of attention prior to the legalization of same-sex marriage, but such unions occur between people of all genders and sexual orientations. Even now, some of the questions raised remain relevant. For example, should businesses extend

Nonmarital cohabitation

An intimate arrangement in which two unmarried and unrelated adults share a common household or dwelling

spousal benefits to cohabitants? Should state and national legislation include or exclude cohabitants from social policies (like family or parental benefits, adoption, surrogate parenting, housing, etc.)?

More than 20 million unmarried adults were cohabiting with their partner in 2022 (Julian, 2023). Contrary to a widely held assumption, nonmarital heterosexual cohabitation is not just a phenomenon among college students; while it is common among those age 25 to 34, the number of cohabiting adults age 50 and older grew by 75% between 2007 and 2017; in 2016, nearly a quarter of all cohabiting adults were over age 50 (Stepler, 2017). Despite these findings, most research on cohabitation has involved college populations. It also bears mentioning that most census data on unmarried couples have tended to focus on heterosexual relationships. In a review of this research, Waite and his colleagues (2000) found that nonmarried cohabitants are significantly less committed to marriage. With regard to the division of labor, cohabiting couples tended to mirror the society around them and accept gender roles characteristic of other couples their age. The same was true for sexual exclusivity. Most believed in sexual freedom within their nonmarried relationship, but most voluntarily limited their sexual activity with outsiders.

Nonmarital heterosexual cohabitation does not appear to be a substitute for marriage, a cure-all for marital problems, or a solution to the problem of frequent divorce. Most cohabitating relationships are short-term; however, the longer that couples cohabit, the more likely they are to eventually marry. In many cohabiting heterosexual couples, as in many married couples, women are likely to do most of the housework.

Unmarried couples, regardless of gender, experience problems quite similar to those of married couples: concern over financial matters, the division of labor, and relationships with extended family members. Although unmarried cohabitation does not fall within acceptable value limits for everyone, it does appear to have functional value for an increasing number of adults of all ages. For many couples, it provides a financially practical situation (two together can live more cheaply than two separately); a warm, homelike atmosphere; ready access to a sexual partner; an intimate interpersonal relationship; and for some, a highly exclusive, long-term partnership.

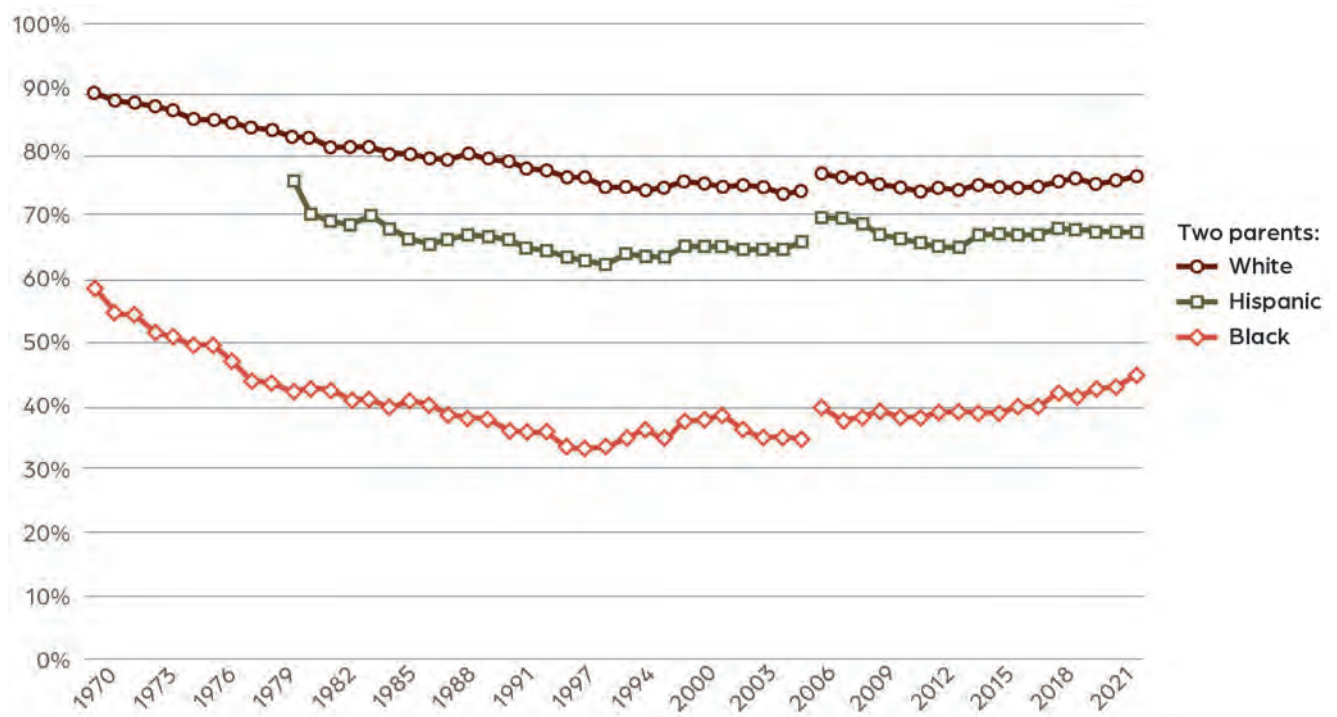
12.7b Childfree Marriage

Most unmarried couples are childfree. Among these couples, a desire for children, a pregnancy, or the birth of a child often leads to marriage. However, some legally married couples have no children and desire none. In recent years, the subject of the voluntarily childfree marriage as an acceptable marital lifestyle has gained increased attention for a number of reasons. First, it is inconsistent with myths about the existence of a maternal instinct—the notion that all women want to have, love, and care for a child or children. Second, it changes the functions of marriage and the family that deal with reproduction, nurturant socialization, and social placement. Third, the availability and reliability of contraceptives make it possible for women and couples to have no children if they so choose. Forsyth (1999) found that childfreeness has become an acceptable choice for some married couples. In the dual-career marriages discussed later, for example, childfreeness may be conducive to both personal and marital satisfaction and adjustment.

12.7c One-Parent Families

One-parent families are those in which the mother or, more commonly, the father does not share the household with the children and the other parent. There is significant variation by race and ethnicity. In 2021, 76.3% of White, 67.5% of Hispanic, and 43% of Black children were living in two-parent homes. In the traditional view, this is the way a family “should be”—it is considered to be the most appropriate family structure for the socialization of children. However, 44.2% of Black, 24.5% of Hispanic, and 16.1% of White children were living with their mothers only (OJJDP, 2024).

Figure 12-16 Percent of Children Living in Two-Parent Homes, by Race and Ethnicity



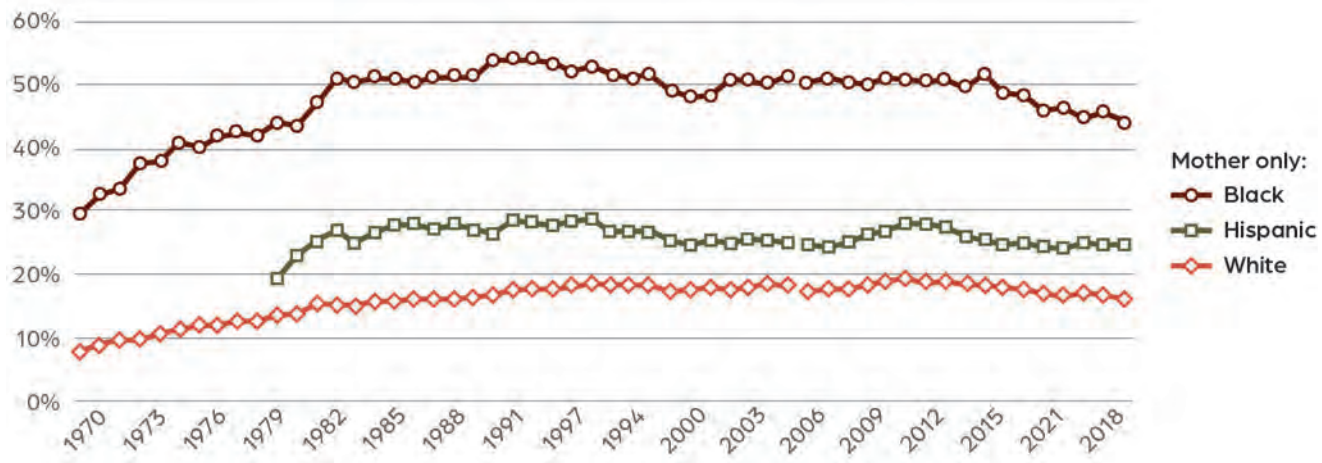
Data Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Current Population Survey—Families and Living Arrangements*, Historical Tables. Table CH-2: “Living Arrangements of White Children Under 18 Years Old: 1960 to Present;” Table CH-3: “Living Arrangements of Black Children Under 18 Years Old: 1960 to Present;” Table CH-4: “Living Arrangements of Hispanic Children Under 18 Years Old: 1970 to Present.” Released November 2023.

Adapted from “OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book,” OJJDP (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention), 2024, <https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/population/qa01202.asp?qaDate=2023>

There are approximately 84.3 million families in the United States (Korhonen, 2024c). Approximately 61.4 million are married-couple families. Around 12.6 million families are female-headed households with no father present (Korhonen, 2024d). In 2023, 8.3% of all families were below the poverty level, 4.6% of married-couple families were below the poverty level, and 21.8% of families without a father present were below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). All these families below the poverty level are likely to receive Medicare, free school lunches, and food stamps, and live in subsidized housing. These are the families affected

most harshly by efforts to cut welfare, by religious group efforts to forbid abortion, and by government policies like “workfare” (i.e., programs that require recipients to work full or part time in order to receive welfare). Members of such families often have disproportionate school dropout rates, few job-related skills, high unemployment rates, irregular incomes, little dental or other health care, and little control over their own fates.

Figure 12-17 Percent of Children Living Only With their Mother, by Race and Ethnicity



Data Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Current Population Survey—Families and Living Arrangements*, Historical Tables. Table CH-2: “Living Arrangements of White Children Under 18 Years Old: 1960 to Present;” Table CH-3: “Living Arrangements of Black Children Under 18 Years Old: 1960 to Present;” Table CH-4: “Living Arrangements of Hispanic Children Under 18 Years Old: 1970 to Present.” Released November 2023.

Adapted from “OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book,” *OJJDP (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention)*, 2024, <https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/population/qa01202.asp?qaDate=2023>

In a cross-cultural study, Bilgé and Kaufman (1983) contend that one-parent families are neither pathological nor inferior. Stigmatizing them in this way, they claim, is a refusal to recognize the economic inequalities of our society. They say that, in combination with an extended network of concerned kin (grandparents, siblings, uncles, aunts, etc.), single-parent families can offer emotional support and are a suitable alternative to the traditional family. Bilgé and Kaufman also note that around the world, one-parent, female-headed families are able to bring up children and provide emotional support.

What happens to children in female-headed families in the US? Cashion (1982) reviewed the social psychological research pertaining to female-headed families published between 1970 and 1980. She concluded that children in these families are likely to have good emotional adjustment, good self-esteem (except when they are stigmatized), comparable intellectual development to others of the same socioeconomic status, and rates of juvenile delinquency comparable to other children of the same socioeconomic standing. The major problems in these families stem from *poverty* and from *stigmatization*. Poverty is associated with problems in school and juvenile delinquency. It also contributes to a poor attitude about the situation and impairs a mother’s sense of being in control. Stigmatization is associated with low self-esteem in children. It results in defining children as problems even when they

do not have problems. Cashion's general conclusion is that the majority of female-headed families, when not plagued by poverty, have children who are as successful and well-adjusted as those of two-parent families.

12.7d Dual-Career Marriages

One of the important social changes that has taken place since World War II has been the increased number of women, generally, and of married women, more specifically, in the labor force. In 1940, despite a sharp increase in the number of working wives during the Depression of the 1930s, only around 15% of all married women living with their husbands held an outside job. By 1960, the proportion had risen to 32%, 58.4% by 1990, 61.4% by 2008, and 67.9% in 2016 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010; U.S. Department of Labor, 2016). Today, around 56.9% of married women are employed outside of the home (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023).

Women who have children are less likely to hold jobs than those who do not, although with each decade, the presence of children decreases in importance as a factor in whether women are employed. The proportion of married women in the labor force is highest among those who have no children under age 6 years to take care of at home. However, even among women who have one or more children under age 6, more than half are employed. Most of these employed women are in clerical or service work, with earnings well below those of their male counterparts. Arrangements of this type are called "dual-employed marriages." (It is assumed, sometimes incorrectly, that the husband is also employed.)

Although women have been entering the labor force in increasing numbers, the "dual-career" marriage is a relatively recent development. The word *career* is used to designate jobs that are taken not just for the income but also for the satisfaction involved. Careers typically involve a higher level of commitment than simple paid employment, and they progress through a developmental sequence of increasing responsibility. One study, conducted by Burke and Weir (1976), of one- and two-career families found that women in two-career families reported fewer pressures and worries, more communication with husbands, more happiness with their marriages, and better physical and mental health than women who did not work outside the home. In contrast, the men in two-career families, as opposed to one-career families, were in poorer health and less content with marriage, work, and life in general. It seems that the husbands of these career wives felt they had lost part of their support system when their wives no longer functioned as servants, homemakers, and full-time mothers. The wives who had careers, on the other hand, were able to expand into roles that had more positive value for them.

Despite these rewards for women, most studies of dual-career marriages suggest that they involve certain strains. One of these strains, particularly for women, develops due to what Fox and Nichols (1983) refer to as "time crunch." Wives are often expected to perform the majority of household tasks whether they have careers outside the home or not. In addition, wives usually accommodate their husbands' careers more than vice versa, and husbands and wives have differential gains and losses when both have a career. Although the professional employment of women is gaining increasing acceptance, sexual equality in marriage has not yet been achieved. Wives are generally expected to give up their own jobs for the sake of their husbands and to consider their families their first duty.

Thinking Sociologically

Does an increase in nontraditional marital and family lifestyles signify a breakdown of the family?

In regard to one-parent families, discuss the following:

- (a) the adoption of children by single persons
- (b) the feminization of poverty
- (c) whether there is a need for children to have two parents



Chapter

12

Wrapping it Up



Summary

1. The family serves a number of different purposes. It is the primary social group, a system of interdependent statuses and structures, and a social institution organized to meet certain essential societal goals.
2. The smallest family units—nuclear and conjugal families—consist of people related by blood, marriage, or adoption who share a common residence. Sociologists also distinguish families of orientation, families of procreation, extended families, and modified extended families.
3. Families throughout the world vary in many different ways, such as in number of spouses. A person may have one spouse (*monogamy*) or two or more (*polygamy*). In *group marriages*, there are several people of each sex. *Sequential monogamy* involves having several wives or husbands in succession, but just one at any given time. *Polygyny*, in which one man is married to more than one woman, is the most common form of polygamy. *Polyandry*, in which one woman has several husbands, is very rare.
4. Families vary in their norms of residence. Most cultures adhere to one of three patterns: *neolocal*, in which the couple is free to choose its own place of residence; *patrilocal*, in which the couple lives in the groom's community; and *matrilocal*, in which the couple lives in the bride's community. Worldwide, the patrilocal pattern is the most common.
5. Families have different norms of descent and inheritance. The *patrilineal* pattern, in which lineage is traced through the father's kin, is the most common; however, there are also *matrilineal* and *bilateral* patterns.
6. Families vary in their norms of authority and decision-making. Sociologists recognize systems of three types: *patriarchal*, *matriarchal*, and *egalitarian*. The patriarchal pattern—defined by male dominance, power, and authority—is the most widespread globally.
7. Norms vary regarding what type of marriage partner is considered appropriate. *Endogamous rules* state that a marriage partner should be from a similar group. *Exogamous rules* state that marriage partners should be from a different group. Incest is almost universally forbidden (an exogamous rule), whereas marriage to a person of the same religion and socioeconomic status is widely encouraged (endogamous rules).
8. Several theoretical perspectives are widely used to explain family structures, interaction patterns, and behaviors. *Functionalists* examine variations in family structures, such as those just described, in terms of the functions they perform. According to this perspective, the family has many major functions: socialization, affection and emotional support, sexual regulation, reproduction, and social placement.
9. According to the *conflict perspective*, family members continually struggle for power and control. Conflict, which stems from the unequal distribution of scarce resources, is a major force behind social change.
10. The *exchange perspective* assumes that there are rewards and costs in all relationships, including in marriages and families. This view suggests that when selecting a spouse, people try to get the best they can with what they have to offer. The *complementary needs theory* proposes that people seek mates who will meet their needs without causing conflicts.

11. The *interactionist perspective* emphasizes the influence of role expectations and how people define situations. In this view, marriage, like other relationships, is a dynamic process of reciprocal interactions.
12. The *developmental perspective* focuses on the time dimension. Change is analyzed in terms of the family life cycle, a series of stages that families go through from their inception at marriage through their dissolution by death or divorce.
13. The family system in the US emphasizes norms of monogamy, neolocal residence, modified extended kinship, bilateral descent and inheritance, egalitarian decision-making, endogamous marriage, and relatively free choice of mate. In a number of respects, however, families in the US are quite variable.
14. Rates of marriage vary widely in different time periods, geographical locations, economic conditions, and due to other factors. The number of marriages also varies by season and by day of the week. The age at marriage in the United States, which declined from the turn of the 20th century until the 1970s, has since increased; marriages among teenagers are unlikely to last.
15. Norms concerning family size and parent-child relationships are influenced by such variables as socioeconomic status, religion, education, urbanization, and female participation in the labor force. Although many married couples have or want to have children today, they generally plan to have small families compared with earlier generations.
16. The United States has one of the highest divorce rates in the world. Like birth rates, rates of divorce vary with time period, geographical location, and socioeconomic level, and differing techniques of computing the divorce rate yield different figures about the rate of divorce. Variations in these rates illustrate how social and cultural factors influence the chances of marital dissolution.
17. Many marital and family lifestyles exist today that do not conform to the traditional model of two parents and two or more children, with husband and wife performing fixed roles. The number of unmarried couples of all ages who live together, for example, may be increasing.
18. Childfree marriages are increasingly common, in part because of the availability and reliability of contraceptives.
19. Marriages in which both spouses work have been common for a long time, but the *dual-career* marriage is a relatively recent development. There may be strains in these marriages, but one study in the 1970s showed that women with careers reported fewer life pressures and worries and more happiness in their marriages. The men in these marriages, by contrast, tended to be relatively discontent.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the importance of definitions of *family* with regard to child custody policies.
2. What norms for choice of marriage partner—endogamous or exogamous—exist for you? In what ways are these norms encouraged and enforced?
3. Why does the United States insist on monogamy when many countries of the world permit polygamy? Why is polygyny very common and polyandry very rare?
4. How have norms of residence, descent and inheritance, authority, and choice of marriage partner changed in the United States over the past century? What do you think has led to these changes?
5. What types of questions would you ask about parent-child relationships, using functionalist, conflict, interactionist, exchange, and developmental perspectives?

6. How do you explain the rapid increase in the median age at first marriage over the past 2 decades in the United States?
7. What types of social conditions are likely to affect the size of families in the United States and around the world? How does size affect family interaction patterns, educational systems, or the economy?
8. Should divorce be made more difficult to obtain? Why or why not? Discuss the consequences of divorce for men, women, children, and society at large.
9. Discuss the pros and cons of nonmarital cohabitation. How are these types of relationships similar to or different from marriages?
10. What kinds of problems are encountered in dual-career marriages that do not occur in marriages where only one spouse is employed?

Pop Quiz for Chapter 12

1. Sociologists consider the family to be a _____.
 - a. social group
 - b. social system
 - c. social institution
 - d. all of the above
2. The family that consists of two or more people related by blood, marriage, or adoption who share a common residence is the _____.
 - a. conjugal family
 - b. extended family
 - c. nuclear family
 - d. family of procreation
3. In the United States, the typical family is the _____.
 - a. extended family
 - b. modified extended family
 - c. one-parent family
 - d. nuclear family
4. The most common form of polygamy is _____.
 - a. polygyny
 - b. polyandry
 - c. group marriage
 - d. exogamy
5. The pattern of ending a marriage with one spouse and marrying another is called _____.
 - a. polygamy
 - b. polyandry
 - c. polygyny
 - d. serial monogamy
6. Buddy and Paulette, who were recently married, live with Paulette's side of the family. This residential pattern is _____.
 - a. patrilocal
 - b. exogamous
 - c. matrilocal
 - d. neolocal
7. Keary and Amy, who are married, trace their children's ancestry through both of their families. This illustrates _____ descent.
 - a. bilateral
 - b. matrilineal
 - c. patrilineal
 - d. endogamous
8. Which type of norm requires that people marry outside their group?
 - a. patriarchal
 - b. matriarchal
 - c. endogamous
 - d. exogamous
9. The idea that every society has a rule that every child should have a father is called the principle of _____.
 - a. cohesiveness
 - b. legitimacy
 - c. paternity
 - d. social placement
10. Marriage rates are influenced by _____.
 - a. economic climate
 - b. war and peace
 - c. seasonal variations
 - d. all of the above



11. The typical family in the United States has both a nuclear and an extended form. T/F
12. Polygyny occurs when a woman has more than one husband. T/F
13. Hebrew laws stated that if a man had sexual intercourse with an unbetrothed virgin, he was required to marry her and to pay her father the bride price. T/F
14. The United States has one of the lowest divorce rates in the world. T/F
15. Women who have children are more likely to hold jobs than those who do not. T/F