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Sociology of the Family

SOCY - 230

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1-Sociology of the Family¹

1.1 The Family as a Social Institution

Sociologists view family as a central social institution in society. Social institutions are mini systems of social behavior with a recognized purpose rooted in a relatively stable value system. In addition to the family, there are six other social institutions in the United States: government (or politics), education, healthcare, religion, the economy, and mass media. These social institutions help satisfy basic social functions in key areas of social life. For example, education is a social institution through which a society's children are taught basic academic knowledge, skills, and cultural norms. Additionally, the economy is a social institution through which a society's resources (i.e., goods and services) are managed. What, then, are the key social functions or purposes of the family in/to society?

In this course, we'll define family as a socially recognized group (usually joined by blood, marriage, cohabitation, or adoption) that forms an emotional connection and serves as an economic unit of society. Defined in this way, the family is universal or nearly universal: some form of the family has existed in every society, or nearly every society, that we know about (Starbuck 2010). Yet, it is also true that many types of families have existed, and the cross-cultural and historical record indicates that these different forms of the family can all “work:” they provide practical and emotional support for their members and they socialize—or provide cultural instruction to—their children.

Despite this definitional clarity, the question of what constitutes a family is a prime area of debate in and across societies. For example, people in the United States, as a whole, are somewhat divided when it comes to determining what does and does not constitute a family. In a 2010 survey conducted by professors at the University of Indiana, nearly all participants (99.8%) agreed that a husband, wife, and children constitute a family, and 92% stated that a husband and a wife without children still constitute a family. The numbers drop for less traditional structures: unmarried couples with children (83%), unmarried couples without children (39.6%), gay couples with children (64%), and gay couples without children (33%) (Powell et al. 2010). This survey revealed that, in the United States, children tend to be the key indicator in establishing “family” status: the percentage of individuals who agreed that unmarried and gay couples constitute a family nearly doubled when children were involved.

The same study also revealed that 60% of American respondents agreed that if you consider yourself a family, you are a family (Powell et al. 2010). That said, the United States government is not as flexible. The United States Census Bureau (2010) defines a family as “a group of two people or more (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together.” While this structured definition can be used as a means to consistently track

¹ This chapter integrates text from Pearce (2020), OpenStax (2017), *Sociology* (2016), and Little (2016).

family-related patterns over several years, it excludes individuals such as cohabitating unmarried heterosexual and gay couples.

Regardless of Americans' subjective definitions of family, it is a fairly objective fact that the family is a central aspect of life in the United States. In a 2010 survey by the Pew Research Center in Washington, DC, 76% of American adults surveyed stated that family is "the most important" element of their existence—just one percent said it was "not important." Notably, the family is also very important to society, more broadly. President Ronald Regan famously stated, "The family has always been the cornerstone of American society. Our families nurture, preserve, and pass on to each succeeding generation the values we share and cherish, values that are the foundation of our freedoms" (Lee 2009). While the design of the family may have changed in recent years, the fundamentals of emotional closeness and support are still present. Most responders to the Pew survey stated that their family today is at least as close (45%) or closer (40%) than the family in which they grew up (Pew Research Center 2010).

1.2 The Nuclear Family in Cross-Cultural and Historical Perspective

Significantly, until recently, Americans thought of only one type of family when they thought of the family at all, and that is the nuclear family: a married (heterosexual) couple and their young children living by themselves under one roof. The nuclear family has existed in most societies with which scholars are familiar, and several of the other family types we will discuss stem from a nuclear family. For example, extended families, which consist of parents, their children, and other relatives, have a nuclear family at their core. Similarly, many one-parent families begin as (two-parent) nuclear families that dissolve upon divorce/separation or, more rarely, the death of one of the parents. While, in recent decades, one-parent families have become more common in the United States because of divorce and births out of wedlock, there is a long history of this family form in the United States.

Let's take a quick look at the cross-cultural and historical development of the nuclear family.

The Nuclear Family Before Industrialization

People in hunting-and-gathering societies probably lived in small groups composed of two or three nuclear families. These groupings helped ensure that enough food would be found for everyone to eat. While men tended to hunt and women tended to gather food and take care of the children, both activities were considered equally essential to a family's or small group's survival.

In horticultural and pastoral societies, food was more abundant, and families' wealth depended on the size of their herds. Because men were more involved than women in herding, they acquired more authority in the family, and the family became more patriarchal than before (Quale 1992).

In patriarchal families, fathers are the major authority figure in the family (just as in patriarchal societies men have power over women). In matriarchal families, mothers are the family's major authority figure. Although this type of family exists on an individual basis, no known society has had matriarchal families as its primary family type. In egalitarian families, fathers and mothers share authority equally.

While many preindustrial societies featured nuclear families, a few societies studied by anthropologists have not. One of these was the Nayar in southwestern India, who lacked marriage and the nuclear family. A woman would have several sexual partners during her lifetime, but any man with whom she had children had no responsibilities toward them. Despite the absence of a father, this type of family arrangement seems to have worked well for the Nayar (Fuller 1976).

Historically, nuclear families were also mostly absent among many people in the West Indies. When a woman and man had a child, the mother took care of the child almost entirely and the father provided for the household but usually lived elsewhere. As with the Nayar, this fatherless arrangement seems to have worked well where it was practiced (Smith 1996).

A more contemporary setting in which the nuclear family is largely absent is the Israeli kibbutz, a cooperative agricultural community where all property is collectively owned. In the early years of the kibbutzim (plural of kibbutz), married couples worked for the whole kibbutz and not just for themselves. Kibbutz members would eat together and not as separate families. Children lived in dormitories from infancy on and were raised by nurses and teachers (although they were able to spend a fair amount of time with their birth parents). The children in a particular kibbutz grew up thinking of each other as siblings and thus tended to fall in love with people from outside the kibbutz (Garber-Talmon 1972). Although the traditional family has assumed more importance in kibbutz life in recent years, extended families continue to be very important, with different generations of a particular family having daily contact (Lavee, Katz, and Ben-Dror 2004).

The Nuclear Family in the American Colonial Period

Moving quite a bit forward in history, different family types abounded in the colonial period in what later became the United States, and the nuclear family was by no means the only type. Nomadic Native American groups had relatively small nuclear families, while nonnomadic groups had larger extended families; in both types of society, however, "a much larger network of marital alliances and kin obligations [meant that] ... no single family was forced to go it alone" (Coontz 1995: 11).

Nuclear families among enslaved African Americans were very difficult to achieve, encouraging adaptations by developing extended families, adopting orphans, and taking in other people not related by blood or marriage.

Many white American parents of colonial children died because the average life expectancy was only 45 years old. As in medieval Europe, large numbers of children who outlived at least one of their parents lived in stepfamilies or with just their surviving parent. White mothers were so busy working the land and doing other tasks that they devoted relatively little time to child care, which instead was entrusted to older children or servants.

Nuclear Families During and After Industrialization in the United States

During industrialization, Americans began to move into cities to be near factories. As a result, a new division of labor emerged in many white American families: men worked in factories and elsewhere outside the home, while many women stayed at home conducting unpaid labor related to childcare and housework (Gottlieb 1993). For this reason, men's incomes increased their patriarchal hold over their families. In some families (like African American and/or working-class families), however, women continued to work outside the home. Economic necessity dictated this; because families now had to buy much of what they consumed, the standard of living actually declined for many families.

Even when women worked outside the home, men out-earned them because of discriminatory pay scales, bringing more money into the family and again reinforcing their patriarchal hold. Moreover, over time, work outside the home came to be seen primarily as men's work, and keeping house and raising children came to be seen primarily as women's work. Historian Stephanie Coontz (1997: 55-56) summarizes the implications of this development:

The resulting identification of masculinity with economic activities and femininity with nurturing care, now often seen as the "natural" way of organizing the nuclear family, was in fact a historical product of this 19th-century transition from an agricultural household economy to an industrial wage economy.

This marital division of labor began to change during the early 20th century. Many white American women entered the workforce in the 1920s because of a growing number of office jobs, and the Great Depression of the 1930s led even more women to work outside the home. During the 1940s, a shortage of men in shipyards, factories, and other workplaces because of World War II encouraged women to join the labor force to support the war effort and the national economy. Women did so in large numbers, and many continued to work after the war ended. But as men came home from Europe and Japan, books, magazines, and newspapers exhorted women to have babies, and babies they did have: people got married at younger ages and the birth rate soared, resulting in the now famous "baby boom generation." Meanwhile, divorce rates dropped, the national economy thrived as auto and other factory jobs multiplied, and Americans began to dream of owning their own homes. Suburbs sprang up, and many white families moved to them, establishing the model of the breadwinner-homemaker suburban nuclear family.

Even so, less than 60% of American children growing up in the 1950s lived in breadwinner-homemaker nuclear families. Moreover, many lived in poverty, as the poverty rate then was

almost twice as high as it is today. Teenage pregnancy rates were also twice as high as today, even if most pregnant teens were already married or decided to get married because of the pregnancy. Although not publicized back then, alcoholism and violence in families were common, as well. Historians have found that many women in this era were unhappy with their homemaker roles, suffering from what Betty Friedan (1963) famously called the “feminine mystique.”

In the 1970s, the American economy worsened. Home prices and college tuition soared much faster than family incomes, and women began to enter the labor force as much out of economic necessity as out of the simple desire for personal fulfillment. Today, more than 60% of married women with children under 6 years of age are in the labor force, compared to less than 19% in 1960. In other words, working mothers are no longer a rarity.

The Nuclear Family, in Summary

In sum, the cross-cultural and historical record reveals two themes relevant to our contemporary understanding of the nuclear family. First, although nuclear families remain the norm in most societies, in practice they are something of a historical rarity: many children, throughout history, have not lived in nuclear families because of the death of a parent, divorce, or birth out of wedlock. Also, the few societies that have not featured nuclear families seem to have succeeded in socializing their children and in accomplishing the other functions that nuclear families serve.

Second, in the United States, the nuclear family model popularized in the 1950s, in which the male was the breadwinner and the female the homemaker, must be considered a blip in American history. At least up until the beginning of industrialization and, for many families, after industrialization, women (like men) worked to sustain the American family. Breadwinner-homemaker families did increase during the 1950s and have decreased since, but their appearance during that decade was more of a historical aberration than a historical norm. As sociologist Arlene Skolnick (1991: 51–52) observed, “Far from being the last era of family normality from which current trends are a deviation, it is the family patterns of the 1950s that are deviant.”

1.3 Other Social Institutions and the Family in the United States

The structure and development of the American nuclear family has been greatly influenced by a number of social institutions. Mass media messages help to construct ideas of what families are “supposed to” look like. Education and healthcare organizations, as well as economic and religious entities, reinforce a typical view of family through the documents, activities, requirements, and processes that are shared with the public. That said, the most powerful social institution shaping perceptions (and realities) of American families today is the government (or politics).

The United States is considered a common law country, meaning that laws are derived in three ways: legislation created by governing bodies; administrative rules and regulations; and decisions

via judicial courts. Most family law (including marriage, divorce, and adoption) is governed by the states. When there is a great deal of advocacy, unrest, inequity, and/or controversy, family-related matters rise to the federal level. Two contemporary examples of this rise include the Supreme Court cases, *Loving v. Virginia* and *Obergefell v. Hodges*.

In 1958, Mildred Loving, an African American woman, and her white American husband, Richard Loving, were sentenced to a year in prison for breaking Virginia's "Racial Integrity Act of 1924." The Lovings appealed their conviction in Virginia and eventually to the Supreme Court, which ruled in 1967 that all laws banning interracial marriage were violations of the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution. *Loving v. Virginia* thus made it illegal for individual states to restrict interracial marriage.

More recently, the ruling on *Loving v. Virginia* has been used to argue that state laws banning same-sex marriages are also unconstitutional. Between 2012 and 2014, multiple plaintiffs filed in state courts to overturn state laws that criminalized same-sex marriages. While several district courts found these laws to be unconstitutional, one district court ruled in favor of the constitutionality of these laws. With the split between courts, the case rose to the level of the Supreme Court, which ruled in 2015 that all states must perform and recognize marriages between same-sex couples (*Obergefell v. Hodges*). Of note is that, while the 1967 decision to legalize interracial marriage was a unanimous decision, the 2015 decision to legalize same-sex marriage was closely contested among the Court members and passed by a narrow 5-4 margin.

From *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) and *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), we can derive some understanding that government influences who we marry, how we divorce, and the legal relationships, rights, benefits, and taxes related to parenting, kinship structures, and children. Critically, we must also note that the government places value on socially-constructed differences such as race, ethnicity, and sexuality in ways that impact individual and family choice.

Yet, laws are only one of the ways that politics impacts family composition. Consider the federal government's role in taxing individuals and families and then providing redistribution of that money via benefits. These benefits, which include the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP or food stamps) and financial aid for college, depend on the government's definitions of eligibility and family structure. As a result, how the government defines "family" or "dependent" might impact how families form or take shape.

Likewise, while co-residence is considered by many to be a pillar of the definition of family, it is important to note that not all families live together. Employment and education options mean that some families make the choice to live apart. Likewise, other families live apart because of government policies that restrict family cohesion. For example, slavery dramatically affected family formations and kinship structures in the United States. Because enslaved African Americans were considered property, their family ties were not respected, which meant that children were habitually taken from their parents, adults were not able to marry, and common-law spouses were separated from one another at will. Additionally, violence against enslaved

African American women in the form of rape resulted in parenting relationships that were structured and controlled by the enslavers.

Returning to the law, immigration statutes also impact family structures and arrangements. For example, while the borders of the United States were open up until the late 1800s, the first restrictive immigration law, the Page Act of 1875, excluded Chinese women from immigrating in order to separate families and discourage Chinese laborers from staying in the United States. By 1882, Chinese men were excluded, as well. Since that time, there have been numerous restrictive immigration laws in the United States, most of them targeting people from Asian and Latin American countries. In fact, restrictive immigration laws and policies have contributed to the formation of involuntary transnational families, whose members live on different continents and/or in different countries. For example, in 2018, the United States developed a “zero tolerance” policy toward undocumented immigration from South America and imprisoned families seeking legal status, separating children from parents.

Notably, and in addition, the law does not recognize units of Americans that frame themselves as chosen families. According to the *SAGE Encyclopedia of Marriage, Family, and Couples Counseling*, “chosen families are nonbiological kinship bonds, whether legally recognized or not, deliberately chosen for the purpose of mutual support and love.” While an option for every individual, chosen families have historically been associated with LGBTQ culture, given members’ experiences of rejection by their families of origin.

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2-Sociological Theories, Paradigms, and the Study of the Family²

Sociologists study social events, interactions, and patterns, and they develop theories in an attempt to explain why things work as they do. In sociology, a theory is a logical explanation (or hypothesis) for a relationship between two or more aspects of social life. Paradigms are philosophical frameworks used to formulate theories in a discipline or area of study.

2.1 Sociological Paradigms

A sociological paradigm is a general way of conceptualizing the world based on abstract assumptions about the nature of social action and the character of social organization. Three paradigms have come to dominate sociological thinking and theory development: functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. Let's review the three sociological paradigms and apply them to the sociological study of the family.

Functionalism

Functionalism, also called structural-functionalism, is a paradigm that views society as an organized system of integrated parts that are designed to meet the needs of society. Functionalism grew out of the writings of English philosopher and biologist, Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), who saw similarities between society and the human body; he argued that just as the various organs of the body work together to keep the body functioning, the various parts of society work together to keep society functioning (Spencer 1898).

Building on Spencer, Alfred Radcliff-Brown (1881–1955) defined the function of any recurrent activity as the part it played in social life as a whole, and therefore the contribution it makes to social stability and continuity (Radcliff-Brown 1952). In a healthy society, all parts work together to maintain social stability, a state called dynamic equilibrium (Parsons 1961).

Robert Merton (1910–2003) pointed out that social processes often have many functions. Manifest functions are the sought or anticipated consequences of a social process, while latent

² This chapter integrates text from Traver (2021), Laff and Ruiz (2021), Lang (2020), OpenStax (2017), *Sociology* (2016), Hammond and Cheney (2016), and *Boundless Sociology* (n.d.).

functions are the unsought consequences of a social process. A manifest function of a college education, for example, includes gaining knowledge, preparing for a career, and finding a good job that utilizes that education. Latent functions of your college years include meeting new people, participating in extracurricular activities, or even finding a spouse or partner. Latent functions can be beneficial, neutral, or harmful. Social processes that have undesirable consequences for the operation of society are called dysfunctions. In education, examples of dysfunction include truancy, dropping out, not graduating, and under-employment.

As a functionalist, Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) believed that all aspects of society serve a function in and for society. In fact, Durkheim even argued that social deviance, or behavior that is outside of what is normal or typical in society, is *functional*: a society's punishment of deviance affirms members' cultural values and norms and reaffirms their moral consciousness.

When considering the role of family in society, functionalists uphold the notion that families are an important social institution and that they play a key role in stabilizing society. The family—and its members—perform certain functions that facilitate the prosperity and development of society.

Sociologist George Murdock conducted a survey of 250 societies and determined that there are four universal residual functions of the family: sexual, reproductive, educational, and economic (Lee 1982). Other sociologists have built on this research to reveal an expanded list of family functions that are common and nearly universal. That means almost all families in all countries around the world have at least some of these functions in common.

First, the family is the primary unit for *socializing children*. Socialization is the process by which people learn to be a member of a culture. It describes the ways that people come to understand social norms, accept a society's ideological beliefs, and adhere to society's values. Socialization is not the same as socializing (i.e., interacting with others, like family, friends, and coworkers); to be precise, it is a learning process that occurs *through* socializing. In other words, if an individual is isolated from social interaction, they won't experience socialization and they'll be rendered ignorant of society's expected beliefs and behaviors.

As the primary agent of socialization, the family teaches young children the ways of thinking and behaving that follow social and cultural norms, values, and beliefs. They also teach children about their social statuses. A social status is defined as the socially-defined position that someone occupies in society. While this position is often a job title, many other types of statuses exist: student, parent, sibling, relative, friend, etc. In sociology, status does not refer to the prestige of a position: “physician” is a social position with more prestige than “shoe-shiner,” but both are equally considered a social status.

Whatever its type, every status is accompanied by a role, which is the behavior expected of someone—and, in fact, *any* and *every* one—with a certain status. For example, you are a “student,” and you share this status in common with other readers of this text. As a student, there are roles expected of you; these roles include coming to class regularly, doing all of the

assigned reading, and studying for exams. A major dimension of socialization is learning the roles our society has for each status and then behaving in the way that status' roles demand.

Many of our social statuses are gendered, meaning that they reference the culturally-variable roles that society attributes to being male or female. Functionalists believe that gender-role socialization is an important part of the economic function of a family. In each family, there is a division of labor that consists of instrumental and expressive roles. Historically, men have assumed instrumental roles in the family, which typically involved work *outside* of the family that provides financial support and establishes family status. In parallel, women assumed expressive roles, which typically involved work *inside* of the family that provides emotional support and physical care for children (Crano and Aronoff 1978). According to functionalists, the differentiation of these roles on the basis of sex ensures that families are well balanced and coordinated. When family members move outside of these roles, functionalists believe that the family is thrown out of balance and must recalibrate in order to function properly. For example, if the father assumes an expressive role such as providing daytime care for the children, the mother must take on an instrumental role such as gaining paid employment outside of the home.

Second, the family is ideally a major source of *practical and emotional support* for its members. It provides food, clothing, shelter, and other essentials to members, as well as love, comfort, help in times of emotional distress, and other types of intangible support. By far, economic support is the most common practical function of today's families. When a family member lets you raid their pantry, do your laundry at their house, or lends you money, that's economic support. In fact, some families cooperate in business-like relationships. In Quebec, Montreal, there is an established pattern of Italian immigrants helping family and friends emigrate from Italy to Canada: they subsidize each other's travel costs, help each other find employment once in Canada, and even privately fund some mortgages for one another. Each participant is expected to support others (economically) in the same manner.

Notably, there is tremendous cultural diversity in how emotional support is defined and experienced in/by families around the world. Family members often share confidences, advice, secrets, and ongoing mutual concern. Intimacy is the social, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and physical trust that is mutually shared between family members. Many sociologists and psychologists believe that intimacy in family relationships functions as a strong buffer to the ongoing stresses experienced by family members outside of the home.

Third, the family helps *regulate sexual activity and sexual reproduction*. All societies have norms governing with whom and how often a person should have sex. The family is the major unit for teaching these norms (i.e., behavioral expectations) and the major unit through which sexual reproduction occurs. As a result, across time and place, many parents have selected spouses for their children and encouraged pregnancy and childbirth only in marriages or long-term relationships. One reason for this is to ensure that infants have adequate emotional and practical care when they are born.

Fourth, the family provides its members with a social identity (i.e., *how we define ourselves in relationship to others/groups*). For example, children are born into their parents' social class, racial and ethnic groups, and religion, and these identifications and realities often mediate their life chances. Some children have advantages throughout life because of the social identity they acquire from their parents, while others face many obstacles for the same reason.

Beyond these functions, however, it is important to note that the functionalist paradigm stresses that sudden or far-reaching changes in family structure and arrangements threaten the family's stability and, thus, the stability of society. As a result, it is a paradigm that reflects a rather conservative perspective (i.e., one adverse to change) on both family and society.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory is a paradigm that views society as an arena in which people compete for scarce resources. This perspective is most closely aligned with the writings of German philosopher and sociologist Karl Marx (1818–1883). Marx put forth the idea of “base and superstructure,” arguing that a society's economic character forms its base, upon which rests its culture and social institutions (i.e., the superstructure). For Marx, it is the base (economy) that determines a society's structure—including its conflicts.

Conflict theory assumes that those who “have” perpetually try to increase their wealth at the expense and suffering of those who “have-not.” It is a power struggle that is most often won by the wealthy elite and lost by the person of common means. Those who “have” are those who possess power. Power is the ability to get what one wants even in the presence of opposition. When power is institutionalized, we call it authority. Authority is institutionalized power embedded within an organization, social system, or society as an established custom or norm.

While conflict theorists agree that the family serves the functions cited by functionalists, they also point to problems within and because of the family that the functionalist perspective tends to minimize or overlook altogether. For example, conflict theorists are quick to point out that American families have been defined as private entities, the consequence of which has been to leave family matters to only those within the family, essentially stripping the family of opportunities for additional support.

Conflict theory also highlights the role of power in family life, and it contends that the family is often not a haven but an arena where power struggles occur. This exercise of power often entails the performance of family statuses and roles. Conflict theorists may study conflicts as simple as the enforcement of rules from parent to child, or they may examine more serious issues such as domestic violence (spousal and child), sexual assault, marital rape, and incest.

The first study of marital power was performed in 1960. Researchers found that the person with the most access to valuable resources in the family held the most power. As money is one of the

most valuable resources in American society, men who worked in paid labor outside of the home often held more power than women who worked inside the home (Blood and Wolfe 1960). Thus, conflict theorists find disputes over money and the division of household labor to be a common source of marital discord. Household labor offers no wages and, therefore, no power. Studies indicate that when men do more housework, women experience more satisfaction in their marriages, reducing the incidence of conflict (Coltrane 2000). In general, conflict theorists tend to study areas of marriage and life that involve inequalities or discrepancies in power and authority, as they are reflective of the larger social structure.

Additionally, conflict theorists believe that the family, as a social institution, contributes to social inequality in several ways. The social identities parents give to children do affect their life chances, but they also reinforce a society's system of stratification. Because families pass along their wealth to their children, and because families differ greatly in the amount of wealth they have, the family helps reinforce existing inequality. In terms of the inheritance of wealth, bilateral descent prevails in the United States and many other Western societies: we consider ourselves related to people on both parents' sides of the family, and parents pass along their wealth, meager or ample, to their children. In some societies, however, descent and inheritance are patrilineal (children are thought to be related only to their father's relatives, and wealth is passed down only to sons), while in others they are matrilineal (children are thought to be related only to their mother's relatives, and wealth is passed down only to daughters).

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a paradigm that focuses on the symbol-rich relationships between individuals. According to symbolic interactionists, communication—or the exchange of meaning through language—is the way most people make sense of their social worlds. In fact, according to Herbert Blumer (1969), symbolic interactionism is premised on three ideas:

1. humans interact with things based on meanings;
2. these meanings come from our interactions with others and society; and
3. these meanings are a matter of interpretation in context.

For example, if you love books, a symbolic interactionist might argue that you learned that books have value (i.e., a specific *meaning*) in your *interactions* with family, friends, or at school. Notably, and as this example exemplifies, symbolic interactionists see people as agents—they shape the social world rather than merely being shaped by it (Herman and Reynolds 1994).

Max Weber's work illustrates the power and perspective of symbolic interactionism. According to Weber, ideas form the basis of society. For example, Weber argued that modern society was grounded in the idea of rationality. A rational society values logic and efficiency over morality and tradition. As a symbolic interactionist, Weber was also interested in individuals' perspectives and relationships. For this reason, when Weber researched social divisions, he focused more on how individuals experienced those divisions than he did on the divisions themselves. An example:

when studying rationality, Weber also studied the impacts of this idea, finding that individuals experience rational society as an iron cage in which they're trapped. For Weber, this sense of entrapment led to a "disenchantment of the world," or a reduction in our sense of magic and wonder in/about the world.

Weber's research, and that of other symbolic interactionists, has led to theories of constructivism, which propose that reality is what humans cognitively construct it to be. According to constructivists, we develop social constructs based on our interactions with others and these constructs go on to shape our world. This approach is often used to understand what's defined as deviant in a society. According to constructivists, there is no absolute definition of deviance or normality; different societies have constructed different meanings for both, and these meanings have given society shape.

According to symbolic interactionists, the family, itself, is a symbol imbued with meaning. To some, it is a father, mother, and children; to others, it is any union that involves respect and compassion. Symbolic interactionists stress that the family is not an objective, concrete reality. Like other social phenomena, it is a social construct that is subject to the ebb and flow of social norms and ever-changing meanings.

Consider, for example, the meaning of the different parts of family: while "parent" was once a symbol of a biological connection to a child, with more parent-child relationships developing through adoption, remarriage, or changes in guardianship, the word "parent" today is more likely to be associated with whomever is socially recognized as having the responsibility for a child's upbringing. Similarly, the terms "mother" and "father" are no longer rigidly associated with the meanings of caregiver and breadwinner. Likewise, while, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a "good father" was one who worked hard to provide financial security for his children, today a "good father" is one who takes the time outside of work to promote his children's emotional well-being, social skills, and intellectual growth.

Additionally, symbolic interactionists often examine how family members and intimate couples interact on a daily basis and arrive at shared understandings of their situations. Studies grounded in symbolic interactionism give us a keen understanding of how and why families operate and define social life the way that they do. For example, a classic study by Lillian Rubin (1976) found that wives in middle-class families say that ideal husbands are ones who communicate well and share their feelings, while wives in working-class families are more apt to say that ideal husbands are ones who do not drink too much and who go to work every day.

2.2 Family Theories

As indicated in the beginning of this chapter, sociological paradigms help to shape the theories that sociologists develop of and about the family. Two such theories—family systems theory and feminist theory—reflect aspects of functionalism and conflict theory, respectively.

Family Systems Theory

When understanding the family, family systems theory has proven to be very powerful. Family systems theory claims that the family is best understood as a complex, dynamic, and changing collection of parts, subsystems, and family members. Much like a mechanic would interface with the computer system of a broken-down car to diagnose which systems are broken (transmission, electric, fuel, etc.), a social worker or researcher would interact with family members to diagnose how and where the systems of the family are in need of repair or intervention. For this reason, family systems theory comes under the functionalist paradigm, considering the dysfunctions and functions of complex groups and organizations.

To fully understand what is meant by systems and subsystems, consider the case of Juan and Maria and their extended family system. Juan and Maria are a middle-aged couple. Juan is a professor who lives with his parents, his wife's widowed mother, his two children (Anna and José), Anna's husband (Alma), and Anna and Alma's three-month-old triplets. Together they represent a four-generation complex family system. There are three couples living within this home (Juan and Maria, Grandpa and Grandma, and Alma and Anna), and there are various levels of strain felt by each couple.

Maria, the matriarch of this family system, experiences the most individual strain of any member. This is because she simultaneously belongs to the following subsystems: Daughter-Mother; Daughter-in-law-Father and Mother-in-law; Spousal; Mother-Son; Mother-Daughter; Mother-in-law-Son-in-law; and Grandmother-grandchildren. While a large number of subsystems in one's life does not automatically imply strain or stress, looking at the family as a complex system with inter-locking and interdependent subsystems, solutions can be found among the members of the system and subsystems. For example, based on this theory, individuals experiencing a crisis or problem are best-served by assessments that include other members of the system.

Feminist Theory

Feminist theorists focus on the inequality of power between men and women in society and in family life, and they advocate for an equal valuing of the choices made by all individuals.²⁶ Feminist theories tend to situate and analyze gender in a broad socio-cultural context, including the family. In fact, many feminist theorists define "family" as a historical institution that has maintained and perpetuated gender-based inequalities. Thus, feminist theories reflect the assumptions of the conflict theory paradigm.

Feminism is a broad term that is the result of several historical social movements attempting to gain equal economic, political, and social rights for women. First-wave feminism focused mainly on legal equality, such as voting, education, employment, marriage laws, and the plight of intelligent, white, middle-class women. Second-wave feminism went a step further by seeking equality in family, employment, reproductive rights, and sexuality. Several different forms of feminism emerged out of the second wave, like liberal feminism, social feminism, and radical

feminism. Liberal feminism is committed to social and legal reforms that will create equal opportunities for women, ending sex discrimination, and challenging sex stereotyping.³⁰ Social feminism aims to redefine capitalism in relation to women's work, in particular. Radical feminist theories insist that the oppression of women is fundamental. Radical feminism directs attention to issues of the body, such as men's control over women's sexuality/reproduction and men's use of rape and other forms of violence to control women.

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3-Sociological Research Methods and the Study of the Family³

The American Sociological Association (ASA) is the largest professional sociology organization in the world. Significantly, there is a section of ASA members that focuses specifically on the family. Here is an excerpt from their mission statement:

Many of society's most pressing problems—teenage childbearing, juvenile delinquency, substance abuse, domestic violence, child and elder abuse, divorce—are related to or rooted in the family. The Section on Family was founded to provide a home for sociologists who are interested in exploring these issues in greater depth.¹²

Many sociologists of the family also belong to the National Council on Family Relations.¹³ Their mission statement reads as follows:

The National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) provides an educational forum for family researchers, educators, and practitioners to share in the development and dissemination of knowledge about families and family relationships, establishes professional standards, and works to promote family well-being.¹⁴

As each of the statements make clear, sociologists of the family endeavor to do more than consider families theoretically; they also research families in order to promote better understandings of and experiences in families. In fact, much of this research can be used by members of the public to make better family-related choices. For example, sociologists of the family have conducted research on the relationship-level variables that lead to divorce. What do you think is the leading cause of divorce? Intimacy issues? Communication problems? The mismanagement of money? Fights with in-laws? Actually, the leading cause of divorce is marrying too young. Specifically, if you marry at 17, 18, or 19 years of age you are far more likely to divorce than if you wait to get married when you are in your 20s. This research finding has been confirmed over decades of study, and it can even help you to make informed decisions in your own life.

³ This chapter integrates text from Traver (2021), Pearce (2020), Hammond and Cheney (2016), and Wikipedia (n.d).

3.1 Sociological Research Methods

Notably, sociological research on the family, like all sociological research, is empirical in nature. This means that it depends on evidence that comes from direct experience, scientifically gathered data, or experimentation. To collect empirical evidence, sociologists use research methods. Let's review the research methods most typically used by sociologists, as well as the applicability of those methods to the sociological study of the family.

Regardless of the method used, all sociologists seek to maximize their research reliability, which refers to how likely their research results are to be replicated if the study is reproduced. (The research finding cited above—that teen marriage is correlated with high divorce rates—would be considered reliable given decades of study-based confirmation.) Sociologists also strive for validity, which refers to how well the study measures what it was designed to measure.

Surveys

As a research method, a survey collects data from subjects who respond anonymously to a series of questions about behaviors and opinions, often in the form of an ordered questionnaire. The U.S. Census is an excellent example of a large-scale survey intended to gather empirical sociological data.

Sociologists use surveys to gather different types of information from a large number of people. While surveys are not great at capturing how people behave in social situations, they are a great method for discovering how people feel and think—or at least how they *say* they feel and think. Surveys can track preferences for presidential candidates, report individual behaviors (such as sleeping, driving, or texting habits), and even collect factual information such as employment status, income, and education levels.

A survey targets a specific population of people who are the focus of a study, such as college athletes, international students, or teenagers living with type 1 diabetes. Most sociologists choose to survey a small sector of the population, or a sample: that is, a manageable number of subjects who represent the larger population. The success of any sociological research study depends on how well a population is represented by the sample. In a random sample, every person in a population has the same chance of being chosen for the study.

After selecting subjects for the survey, a sociologist presents them with the questionnaire, which might consist of closed-ended or open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions might be yes-or-no or multiple-choice questions, where subjects are asked to select from a limited number of responses to each question. This results in quantitative data, research collected in numerical form that can be counted and is easy to tabulate. For example, you could just count up the number of “yes” and “no” responses to survey questions and then chart them into percentages.

Surveys can also present more complex open-ended questions that seek answers beyond “yes” and “no.” How do you plan to use your college education? Why do you like a particular musician or band? With these questions, the answers vary from person to person. They also require short essay responses, as well as participants who are willing to take the time to convey more personal information. This results in qualitative data, research that is subjective, based on what is seen in a natural setting, and is harder to organize and tabulate. Notably, while the sociologist will end up with a wide range of responses, these responses provide a wealth of insight that promote understanding.

Surveys are a popular research method in the sociological study of the family. One of the largest social surveys taken in the United States is the General Social Survey, which has been collected almost every year since 1972. It has generated a large volume of information on a number of different aspects of American life, including the family. In Great Britain, the Family Resource Survey began in 1992 and has provided much needed insight into the needs and functioning of British families.⁵ In China, an American team of researchers performed a survey-based research study called the National Health and Nutrition Survey, which collected family and health data. In Iraq, a medical family survey was conducted by the World Health Organization and Iraqi officials, wherein more than 9,000 households were surveyed.⁷ The focus in that survey was the impact of the ongoing war on families and social networks.

Interviews

An interview is a one-on-one conversation between a sociologist and a research subject. Interviews mimic the open-ended questions on surveys: the subject is asked a series of questions to which they can respond as they wish. In the back-and-forth conversation of an interview, a sociologist often asks for clarification, spends extended time on a subtopic, and poses additional questions. There are no right or wrong answers to interview questions. Ideally, a subject will feel free to open up and answer questions with honesty and in their complexity.

A sociologist engaged in interview-based research benefits from gaining a subject’s trust, empathizing or commiserating with a subject, and listening without judgment. Sociologists should also avoid directing or prompting interview subjects to respond to questions in a specific way; otherwise, their research results will be unreliable.

Most typically, interviews are recorded and transcribed (i.e., turned into text). While sociologists are certainly interested in an interview subject’s individual experiences and perspectives, they always interview numerous subjects; aggregating or combining the findings from each interview to learn something about the subjects, as a whole.

Interview questions like “How did society's view of alcohol influence your decision to drink/not drink?” and “Did your family support your efforts to enroll in college?” are difficult to answer. Likewise, the answers to these questions are difficult to categorize and count. Thus, most interview transcripts are analyzed as qualitative data.

Sociologists of the family often use in-depth qualitative interviews to understand the family, specifically the nuances of family-members' experiences. This is what Wallerstein and Blakely (1995) do in *The Good Marriage*, a book that features data from interviews with 50 happily-married couples (i.e., couples that were considered by those around them to have a "good" marriage). Notably, Wallerstein's book was published during an era of family research that was focused on divorce and family dysfunction, and *The Good Marriage* made it more acceptable to study the positive functioning of families in the United States.

Observational Research/Field Work/Ethnography

Most sociologists conduct their research out in the world, meeting subjects where they live, work, and play. One method, known to sociologists by many names—observational research, field work, and/or ethnography—involves the collection of data through the lengthy/direct observation of a social life of a group. To conduct observational research, the sociologist must be willing to step into new environments and observe and experience those worlds. The key strength of this research method is that it unfolds in the subject's natural environment, whether it's a coffee shop, tribal village, homeless shelter, the Department of Motor Vehicles, a hospital, airport, mall, or beach resort. In observational research/field work, the sociologists, rather than the subjects, are the ones out of their element.

While in the subject's natural environment, the sociologist is busy collecting observational data. Initially, in the field, these observations are recorded as jottings, or informal notes. Later, once the sociologist returns home or finds the time, the jottings are turned in to formal field notes (i.e., complete and detailed reports of what was observed).

In some observational research studies, the sociologist is a participant. In participant observation, sociologists join a group's routine activities for the purpose of observing group members within that context. This method lets sociologists experience—firsthand—a specific aspect of the group's social life. For example, a sociologist might work as a waitress in a diner, live as a homeless person, or ride along with police officers as they patrol their regular beat. Often, sociologists try to disappear into the population they're studying, hiding their true identity and purpose in an effort to protect the integrity of their research.

Once inside a group, some participant observers spend months or even years pretending to be one of the people they're observing. However, as observers, they cannot get too involved in the social life of the group; they must keep their purpose in mind and apply the sociological perspective.

In other observational research studies, the sociologist is a non-participant observer who is known, by members of the researched community, as someone studying that community. Observational research tends to focus on how subjects view their own social standing and how they understand themselves in relation to a community. Sociologists might observe, for example,

a small American fishing town, an Inuit community, a village in Thailand, a Buddhist monastery, a private boarding school, or an amusement park. These places all have borders defined by specific behaviors and cultural norms. A non-participant observer would commit to spending a pre-determined amount of time studying every aspect of that bounded place, taking in as much as possible.

Both participant and non-participant observers engage in field work to watch and learn. Sociologists who use this method try to be alert and open minded, and they strive to record all observations accurately. In essence, the aim of these observations is the identification of social patterns. As these patterns emerge, sociologists begin to develop specific questions about what they're observing; these questions lead to more pointed observations and further understanding. Upon conclusion of their research, a sociologist might present their findings in an article or a book that describes what he or she witnessed, experienced, and learned.

While studies of the family using observational research are much less common than studies of the family using surveys, their results are fruitful and have greatly impacted the field. Take, for example, Arlie Russell Hochschild's and Anne Machung's book, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home*. In *The Second Shift*, Hochschild and Machung observed family life in a dozen homes throughout the 1970s and 1980s in an effort to explore the "leisure gap" between men and women. Most of the book's chapters are dedicated to the routines of a different couple, delving into the apparent and unnoticed motivations behind their behaviors. Similar to earlier research that is cited in the book, *The Second Shift* found that women still take care of most of the household and childcare responsibilities of/for a family, despite their entrance into the labor force. Hochschild's and Machung's research also presented a clear division between the preferred constructs of men and women across social classes: the working class and men preferred traditional constructions of gender and marital relationship, while the middle class and women preferred more egalitarian constructions. As *The Second Shift* indicates, researchers engaged in family-based studies using participant observation live in, belong to, or participate in the very familial experience that is being studied.

Experiments

You've probably tested personal social theories before; theories like, "If I study at night and review in the morning, I'll strengthen my memory of the course material" or "If I stop eating junk food, I'll feel better." In each of these cases, you're testing a hypothesis or causal theory. Sociologists do the same when they conduct an experiment. In an experiment, a social situation is constructed and observed to test a hypothesis or if-then statement. Experiments are a classic scientific method for collecting data.

To begin an experiment, a sociologist selects a set of people with similar characteristics, such as age, class, race, or education. These people are then divided into two groups: an experimental group, which is exposed to the independent variable (i.e., the variable that is changed or controlled), and the control group, which is not. Then both groups are assessed on the same

dependent variable (i.e., the variable of interest that is tested or measured). For example, to examine the impacts of tutoring, a sociologist might expose an experimental group of students to tutoring (the independent variable) while denying tutoring to the control group. Then, the sociologist would administer the same exam to both groups of students. Any difference in exam performance (the dependent variable) between the two groups would be attributed to the presence/absence of tutoring.

In sociology, there are two main types of experiments: laboratory experiments and field experiments. In a lab setting, sociologists create artificial situations that allow them to manipulate variables. This means that the experiment unfolds in a research setting that can be closely controlled. In a field setting (i.e., in the world, as it exists), the experiment cannot be as easily controlled.

Many lab-based experimental studies of the family take place in counseling, medical, or residential treatment settings and/or in community centers. Perhaps one of the most prominent clinical researchers of the family is Dr. John Gottman. Dr. Gottman studied couples in depth by videotaping them in clinically-controlled apartments, or “love labs,” where he observed their daily interaction patterns and carefully analyzed the footage of their interactions. His research led to findings now referred to as the “Four Horsemen of Divorce,” as well as the classification of four aspects of deeply troubled marriages: defensiveness, stonewalling, criticism, and contempt.

One famous example of a field experiment on the family occurred in Minneapolis, Minnesota in the early 1980s. In this federally-funded study, sociologists sought to understand whether arresting men for domestic violence made it less likely that they would commit such violence in the future. To test this hypothesis, they had police take one of the following actions after arriving at the scene of a domestic dispute: arrest the suspect; separate him from his wife or partner for several hours; or warn him to stop (but not arrest him or separate him from his wife/partner). The researchers then determined the percentage of men in each group who committed repeated acts of domestic violence during the next six months, finding that those men who were arrested for domestic violence had the lowest rate of recidivism (i.e., repeat offending). While this finding led many jurisdictions across the United States to adopt a policy of mandatory arrest for domestic violence suspects, replications of the Minneapolis experiment in other cities found that arrest could, at times, correlate with an increase in recidivism. According to researchers, this variability depended on which city was being studied and on certain characteristics of the suspects, including whether they were employed at the time of their arrest. Thus, perhaps the most important caveat with experiments is that their results are not often generalizable beyond the specific subjects studied. Despite this problem, however, experiments in sociology (and the other social sciences) have yielded very valuable insights into the sources of attitudes and behavior.

Secondary Analysis (of Existing Data)

While sociologists often engage in original research studies, they also contribute knowledge to the discipline through the secondary analysis of existing data. Secondary data don't result from firsthand collection; instead, they are data collected by someone else.

For example, sociologists often analyze data collected by agencies. In fact, governmental departments and global groups, like the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics and the World Health Organization, collect data that are extremely valuable to sociologists. Sociologists might find public statistics on foreclosure useful in studying the effects of the 2008 recession, or they might compare racial demographic profiles with data on education funding to examine the public resources made available to different groups.

One of the advantages of secondary data is that it is nonreactive (or unobtrusive), meaning that it does not include direct contact with subjects. Unlike studies requiring direct contact with people, using previously-collected data doesn't require entering a population and the investment and risks inherent in that research process.

Yet, using available data does have its challenges. Public records are not always easy to access; a sociologist will often need to do some legwork to track them down. Likewise, there is no way to verify the accuracy of existing data. For instance, while it's easy to tally how many drunk drivers are pulled over by the police, does this number necessarily represent *all* drunk drivers? What about those who are never pulled over, thereby escaping count?

Another problem arises when data are unavailable in the exact form needed, or when they don't reflect the exact information sought. For example, while the average salaries paid to professors at a public college or university is public record, these figures don't necessarily reveal how long it took each professor to reach the salary range, what their educational backgrounds are, or how long they've been teaching.

In the United States in the early 1990s, the National Survey of Families and Households was administered to more than 13,000 families. The massive data set that resulted from this survey now exists in electronic form and can be analyzed by anyone seeking to look at specific research questions that pertain to the American family experience. Other sources of family-focused secondary data are the U.S. Census Bureau and the Population Reference Bureau.

Content Analysis

Many sociologists employ content analysis, engaging in the systematic examination of cultural products and documented communications. For example, to study how women were encouraged to act and behave in the 1960s, a sociologist might watch movies, television shows, and situation comedies from that period. Likewise, to research changes in attitudes related to

the #blacklivesmatter movement, a sociologist might rely on Facebook posts, tweets, and Instagram stories.

When conducting content analysis, it is important to consider the moment in time in which the analyzed products and communications were released, as they tend to reflect the attitudes and common cultural ideals that existed at the time of release.

One example of a research study that engaged content analysis to understand the family is “Gender and Parenting: A Content Analysis of the American Sitcom” by Mollie Borer and Nicholas Alexander. Through an examination of television depictions of the American family across two historical time periods, the researchers found that, while traditional gender norms were still reflected in contemporary sitcoms, these norms were actually reversed today—with men and women exhibiting parental behaviors historically associated with the “opposite sex.”

Historical-Sociological Methods

According to Kristen Luker (2008: 191), sociologists turn to historical methods “to answer one of two questions: either (a) what events in the past shaped how this turned out in the present? or (b) why did things turn out this way in one place and another way in another place?” In the process, they often draw on historical materials sourced from individuals or institutional archives, and they frequently engage in comparative and/or case-study analyses.

For example, sociologists using comparative historical-sociological methods are often interested in the development of a phenomenon over time and space. For example, they might use archived organizational records to understand how corporate missions have shifted over the century—or how they differ per national context.

Sociologists engaged in historical-sociological case-study research use archival materials for the in-depth analysis of a single event, situation, or individual. A major criticism of this method is that, while offering in-depth knowledge on a topic, one case does not provide sufficient evidence to form a social pattern or generalized conclusion. However, case studies can be useful when the single case is unique. In these instances, a single case study can add tremendous knowledge to a certain discipline.

My own research uses historical child and family constructions as a lens through which to view complex social-structural and social-cultural phenomena. More specifically, I use centuries-old organizational documents from the Children’s Aid Society (CAS) of New York City to examine (and compare) the relationship between state-based systems of child and agricultural welfare, specifically the CAS’s placement of New York City dependents with Upstate New York farm families. Through this research, I detail the organization’s convergence with Upstate dairy farming, clarifying urban child placement and rural dairying as similar and linked responses to the social, economic, and political changes occurring across New York State during the project period (1853-1929).

3.2 Ethical Concerns

Given their work with humans, sociologists must consider their ethical obligation to avoid harming subjects or groups while conducting their research. The ASA maintains a code of ethics, or formal guidelines for conducting sociological research, consisting of principles and ethical standards to be used in the discipline. This code also describes procedures for filing, investigating, and resolving complaints of unethical conduct.

Some of the ASA guidelines state that sociologists must try to be skillful and fair-minded in their work. Sociologists must obtain participants' informed consent and notify subjects of the responsibilities and risks of research before they agree to partake. During a study, sociologists must also ensure the safety of participants and immediately stop work if a subject becomes endangered. Additionally, sociologists are required to protect the privacy of research participants; even if pressured by authorities, sociologists are not ethically allowed to release confidential information.

Sociologists must also make their research results available to other scholars, disclose sources of financial support, and refuse funding from any organization that might cause a conflict of interest. Notably, the ASA's ethical considerations shape both the study and the publication of results.

As an additional layer of subject protection, every college, university, or research institution has an Institutional Review Board (IRB) that oversees and makes sure all in-house research meets ethical standards. Thus, before they begin a research project, sociologists are required to submit a written description of their research plan to their IRB for approval.

Notably, Max Weber (1864–1920) identified another crucial ethical concern deserving of sociologists' attention. Weber understood that personal values could distort the framework for collecting and disclosing study data. Sociologists, he stated, must establish value neutrality, a practice of remaining impartial, without bias or judgment, during the course of a study and in publishing results.

Is value neutrality possible? Many sociologists believe it's impossible to set aside personal values and achieve complete objectivity. They caution readers, rather, to understand that sociological studies may, by necessity, contain a certain amount of value bias. Value neutrality does not mean having no opinions. It means striving to overcome personal biases, particularly subconscious biases, when collecting and analyzing data. This is particularly important—and difficult—in sociological studies of the family.

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4-Dating and Sex⁴

Sixty years ago, if you were of marrying age, you'd most likely select a mate based on how your parents felt about them, how healthy the person was, how good/moral their character appeared to be, and the stability of their economic resources. Are these still our primary considerations? How do we meet potential partners? What role does sex play? These are the types of questions sociologists consider when we study dating and other forms of mate selection.

4.1 Dating

Dating, as we know it, developed in the 20th century as a practice in which people meet and participate in activities together in order to get to know each other. Prior to dating, courting was common in the United States. Courting, which involved strong rules and customs, evolved into dating due to wide-spread use of the automobile, which enabled young people to have more freedom. After the industrial revolution, with the change from farming to factory work, love—rather than necessity—became the basis for relationships. Today, dating is more casual than ever, and it takes many forms (couple, group, online, etc.).

In the United States, there are millions of people between the ages of 18-24—the prime age-range of dating and mate selection. The United States Statistical Abstracts estimates that 9.5% of the American population, or about 15,675,000 males and 15,037,000 females, are in this age range. Does that mean that you could have 15-30 million potential mates to choose from? Yes, potentially, but no, in more realistic terms. You see, while it would take many lifetimes to meet that many people, mate selection also proceeds through a process of filtering, wherein we identify new contacts as either being in or out of the pool of people whom we consider eligible for dating.

Notably, we tend to engage in assortative mating, filtering and then eventually choosing mates that are more like us than not. The ways in which we choose partners assortatively are quite wide and varied, but they can be divided very loosely into two categories: the physical and the social.

In terms of the *physical*, it's important to note that attraction and the evaluation of physical appearance is subjective or defined differently for each individual. Truly, what one person finds attractive is not what others might find to be so. Yet, there are a few biological, psychological, and social-emotional aspects of appearance that tend to make an individual more attractive to more people; these include slightly above-average desirable traits and symmetry in facial features.

⁴ This chapter integrates text from Traver (2021), Pearce (2020), OpenStax (2017), and Hammond and Cheney (2016).

According to the United States Centers for Disease Control, the average man in the United States is five feet ten inches tall and weighs about 177 pounds. The average woman is about five feet four inches tall and weighs about 144 pounds. Did you just compare yourself? Most of us tend to compare ourselves to averages or to others we know. In fact, that's how we come to define our personal level of attractiveness. This is important to understand because, as we subjectively judge ourselves as more or less attractive, we tend to limit our mating/dating pool to those we think are in our same category of beauty.

The *social* aspects of assortative mating include such categorical variables as culture, ethnicity, religion, education, and class or socioeconomic status. In particular, education level has become an increasingly assortative factor within union formations in the United States, with individuals of similar educational backgrounds most typically forging partnerships. Because class is so closely associated with higher education, this pattern also trends with socioeconomic status. Notably, millennials (or Gen Y) and members of Gen Z (or iGen) are coping with both the increased importance of education and increased college costs/student debt. How this affects/will affect their coupling, union formation, and family patterns remains to be seen; however, it is likely to both decrease the likelihood of marriage and increase the average age at first marriage.

Another important variable in dating/mate selection is propinquity, or the geographic closeness experienced by potential dates and mates. Consider the proximity experienced by individuals living in the same dorms or apartment buildings; going to the same university or college; working in the same place of employment; or belonging to the same religious group. It makes sense that this proximity will increase the frequency of interactions and lead you to see each other as potential mates.

How we choose mates is also influenced by our family experiences, values, and expectations. For example, it is common for adults to communicate and mold the relational expectations of children, asking their thirteen-year-old if they have a boyfriend or girlfriend (therefore assuming a desired future partnership) or playing wedding with their five-year-old (therefore promoting legalized monogamy). Additionally, our family of birth/origin also impacts how we orient to particular family themes, identity images, and myths that further delineate and define who is seen as an appropriate intimate partner.

Yet, consistent with the principles of assortative mating, the variable that has been found to be most predictive of our dating and mating selection choices is homogamy. Homogamy refers to our tendency to mate/date someone of similar attraction, background, interests, and needs. In fact, researchers have uncovered patterns that indicate that relational homogamy is indirectly correlated with long-term relationship quality, given fewer experiences of disagreement and disconnect. Some researchers even argue that our propensity to filter homogamously extends to such a point that we marry people like our parents!

That said, just as “birds of a feather flock together,” we also know that “opposites attract.” Heterogamy refers to the dating or pairing of individuals with differences in traits. Notably, however, over time, and as commitments are made, even heterogamous couples develop more

homogamy: adopting similar mannerisms, finishing each other's sentences, dressing alike, developing mutually common hobbies and interests, and parenting together.

4.2 Sex

Sex is important to us because it: represents an activity that is often viewed as a rite of passage into adulthood; is pleasurable; reinforces our (often gendered) statuses/roles; promotes developmental and human generativity. Yet, despite this importance, sex is also a passive part of our daily lives. Samuel and Cynthia Janus published *The Janus Report on Sexual Behavior* in 1993.⁴ For this research, they studied 2,765 men and women to understand general trends in Americans' sexual practices and patterns. One trend was found in sexual frequency, with Americans across age groups reporting 2-3 sexual encounters (of 25-minutes each) per week. In other words, sex is a minor part of our daily time allocation: most of us spend most of our lives, even during the prime age-range of dating and mate selection, doing nonsexual things.

While life scientists often study the biological drives that ground sexual activity, sociologists are more interested in sexual scripts. As you know, a script is what actors read or study to guide their behavior in a certain part; it is a blueprint for what they "should do" in that part. Similarly, a sexual script is a socially-constructed blueprint for sexual expression, sexual orientation, sexual behaviors, sexual desires, and the sexual component of our self-definition. Do note that we are not born with sexual scripts in place; they are learned through a process of sexual socialization, wherein we learn how, when, where, with whom, why, and with which motivations we are sexual beings. Sexual scripts, once learned, will shape how our biological drives are answered.

Many of us learn our sexual scripts in a passive way, from a synthesis of concepts, images, ideals, and (sometimes) misconceptions. For example, the commonly-held belief that men and women are different creatures—even "opposites"—certainly impacts sexual scripts, as do religious messages, the presence/absence of health education, and the consumption of pornography.

Through sociological study, it has been found that many sexual scripts depend on problematic assumptions like men should be in charge of sex; woman should not enjoy (or at least not let on that they enjoy) sex; men are more sexual than women; and all sex leads to orgasm. These assumptions are unrealistic, unhealthy, and undermining of intimacy. More positive sexual scripts encourage sexual partners to take ownership of their sexual experiences; communicate openly and honestly about their feelings; and learn to meet one another's desires, needs, and wishes while making sure that their own desires, needs, and wishes are met, as well.

4.3 Sexual Orientation, Desires, and Behavior

As indicated, sexual scripts tend to stipulate who should have sex with whom. Closely tied to this idea is the concept of sexual orientation, or the sexual preference one has for their partner (male, female, both, other, or neither). There are a few common sexual orientations that can be seen at the societal and personal level. Heterosexuality is the sexual attraction between a male and a

female. Homosexuality is the sexual attraction between a male and another male or a female and another female.⁵ Bisexuality is the sexual attraction to both male and female sexual partners. Asexuality is the presence of no attraction to either sex.

In addition to sexual orientation, researchers indicate that there are two other dimensions of sexuality: sexual desire and sexual behaviors. Sexual desire refers to our attraction to sexual partners and experiences, independent of our behaviors. Sexual behaviors are our actual sexual actions and interactions. It is important to note that sexual orientation, desire, and behavior are not always, or always in reference to, the same thing. For example, a heterosexual male may have had a gay sexual experience in the past, and he may, at times, desire males and females regardless of his actual sexual activities. Likewise, a lesbian female may have had a short-term heterosexual relationship but continue to define herself as a lesbian. These three dimensions of sexuality are surprisingly incongruent among adults in American society.

Edward O. Laumann, et al. (1994) conducted the largest sociological study of American sexuality ever published, surveying about 3,400 respondents. One aspect of that study was the prevalence of self-identified sexual orientations. While most members of American society identify as heterosexual, approximately 7.1% of the males and 3.8% of the females in Laumann et al.'s study reported having had sex with a partner of the same sex. In other words, while the researchers found that heterosexuality is by far the most common response to questions about sexual orientation, they also learned that respondents engaged in a wider variety of sexual behaviors.

Research also reveals that a plethora of sexual orientations exist beyond heterosexual (straight), gay, bi-, and asexual, and that sexual orientation is fluid. Alfred Kinsey was one of the first researchers to conceptualize sexuality as a continuum rather than a strict dichotomy of gay or straight, creating a six-point rating scale that ranges from exclusively straight to exclusively gay. In his 1948 work, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, Kinsey wrote, "Males do not represent two discrete populations, (straight) and (gay). The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats ... The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects" (Kinsey 1948).

Will all of that said, the number of same-sex couples in the United States has grown significantly over the past few decades. For instance, the United States Census Bureau reported 594,000 same-sex-couple households, a 50% increase from 2000. This increase is a result of more coupling, the growing social acceptance of LGBTQ Americans, and a subsequent increase in Americans' willingness to report same-sex partnerships.

⁵ As already established, subsequent to this use, and based on reporting by Peters (2016), the words "gay," "lesbian," "same-sex," or the acronym "LGBTQ" (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning) are used when/where appropriate throughout this textbook.

4.4 Theories of Date/Mate Selection

In an effort to understand (and even predict) dating and mate selection, social scientists have developed a number of theories. Two of those theories—social exchange theory and stimulus-value-role theory—are described below.

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory engages a rational-choice formula to clarify the dating/mate selection process, arguing that we strive to maximize rewards and minimize costs in our choice of a partner.

$$\text{Rewards} - \text{Costs} = \text{Choice}$$

According to social exchange theorists, when we interact with potential dates and mates we run a mental balance sheet in our heads. For example, upon meeting a single man, a heterosexual woman might consider the rewards of partnering with him: “He’s tall, confident, funny, and friends with my friends.” As she proceeds to get to know him better, however, she might also consider the costs: “But, he chews tobacco, only wants to party, and just flirted with another woman while we were talking.” In other words, as we interact with potential dates and mates, we evaluate them on their appearance, disposition, goals, aspirations, and other traits while we simultaneously remember how we rate and evaluate ourselves. Rarely do we seek out the best-looking person at a party—unless we define ourselves as an even match for him or her. Notably, this overall evaluation depends, to a great extent, on how well we feel matched on racial and ethnic traits, religious background, socio-economic class, and age similarities—the categories of assortative homogamy that were identified earlier in the chapter.

There are several concepts that are central to social exchange theory. Outcomes are those rewards or costs that are received or incurred in an exchange relationship. Social exchange theory makes no assumptions about whether an individual will view a particular outcome as positive or negative; the theory only assumes that behavior is consistent with what individuals value in their lives.

Resources are possessions or behavioral capabilities (human capital) that have value to others and to oneself (e.g., an individual’s job and income may have value to their partner). When one resource outweighs another resource, it may become a barrier (e.g., an individual’s income may be a resource that enables them to leave the partnership). Barriers are the costs of making a choice.¹⁵ Several studies find when barriers are many and alternatives are few, individuals may engage or continue in relationships that are not safe or satisfying.

Alternatives are the variety of possible exchange relations available to individuals. An individual’s alternatives are those opportunities that produce outcomes that are of value to the individual, including exchange relationships with other individuals. There are both costs and rewards

associated with alternatives, and social exchange theory implies that individuals attempt to weigh rewards and costs when making decisions about alternatives.

Stimulus-Value-Role Theory

How do strangers transition from not knowing one another to pairing off together? Stimulus-value-role theory posits that a partnering is mutual and dependent upon the subjective attractions and the subjective assets and liabilities each individual brings to the relationship.

In their very first encounter, a *stimulus* (often physical) alerts strangers to take notice of each other. These strangers then engage in a process that either excludes or includes one another as potential dates or mates. One key aspect of inclusion is the establishment of intimacy. Intimacy is not sex, although sex may be one of many expressions of intimacy.

After a period of dating or hanging out, these former strangers compare *values* (notions of what is desirable or undesirable) and evaluate/calculate the rewards/costs of being together. If time and relational compatibility support it, the pair may choose to take on relevant *roles* (being a boyfriend, being an involved partner, etc.), which typically beg exclusive dating, wherein a mutual agreement is made to exclude others from dating either individual in the relationship.

Significantly, both social exchange theory and stimulus-value-role theory privilege rationality, approaching dating/mate selection as a process that unfolds through relatively predictable stages (as if in an economic context) in an effort to maximize rewards and minimize our losses. Do you find this emphasis on rational action surprising? Effective? When evaluating these theories, it's important to remember that dating/mate selection can include many obvious and subtle factors that can't be predicted or accounted for in advance. Likewise, while both theories assume that humans act rationally when deciding on an exchange, this is not always true or the case.²¹ Finally, it should be mentioned that today, in the United States, what we look for in a date is often different from what we look for in a spouse. As a result, many dates might be better conceived of as temporary adventures—not steps towards a defined destination.

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5-Cohabitation and Marriage⁶

A couple is simply a pair of people who identify themselves in terms of belonging together, trusting one another, and having a unique relationship separate from all others. A “we” is close to the same thing, yet it focuses on the relationship as an entity in itself; it is the social and emotional boundary a couple establishes when they decide to become a couple. While a “we” can be a married couple, it can also include cohabiters or other intimate non-married couple arrangements.

In the United States, marriage is a legal union between two adults. Cohabitation refers to when two partners live together without going through the formalities of marriage. The U.S. Census Bureau conducts annual surveys of the American population and publishes them as Current Population Surveys. In an October 2008 Current Population Survey, married Americans comprised the largest family type. Single never-married Americans, which included roughly 6.8 million cohabiters, constituted the second largest type.

5.1 Cohabitation v. Marriage

Cohabitation in the United States became common in the late 20th century. Although it is illegal in three states (Mississippi, Michigan, North Carolina), a total of 4.85 million couples now live together in this way. According to the United States Centers for Disease Control:

Among both men and women aged 15-44 who had ever cohabited and/or married, the largest proportion cohabited before their first marriage. Approximately 28% of men and women cohabited before their first marriage, whereas 23% of women and 18% of men married without ever cohabiting. About 15% of men and women had only cohabited (without ever marrying), and less than 7% of men and women first cohabited after their first marriages ended.¹¹

Notably, cohabitation is most common among younger Americans and the less religious. Reporting on American trends of cohabitation, David Popenoe (2009) found that Americans cohabitated at a rate that is significantly lower than that of Western Europeans.

That said, cohabitation is an increasingly popular option for contemporary partnership in the United States. One reason for this is reflected in policies, set forth by the social institution of government/politics, at the state and federal levels. In some states, including the state of California, laws recognize cohabiting couples as domestic partners. In California, such couples are defined as people who “have chosen to share one another’s lives in an intimate and committed

⁶ This chapter integrates text from Pearce (2020), OpenStax (2017), Hammond and Cheney (2016), *Sociology* (2016), and *Boundless Sociology* (n.d.).

relationship of mutual caring,” and they benefit from a range of private and public family-based benefits.

Additionally, some federal policies seem to incentivize cohabitation over marriage. Let’s start with one policy that might be familiar to you: federal student loans. The federal student loan system differentiates between married couples and cohabiting or common-law relationships. It presumes that a married couple combines their resources and that a cohabiting couple does not; so, marrying a partner who has a higher income will likely lessen your financial aid award, while cohabiting with them will not.

Receipt of Medicare and Medicaid might also mediate a couple’s decision to cohabit rather than marry. Medicare is federally-funded health insurance for people who are aged 65 or older, some younger people with disabilities, and people with end-stage renal disease. Medicaid also provides healthcare coverage, in this case for eligible low-income adults, children, pregnant women, elderly adults, and people with disabilities. Like income taxes and social security, these government programs presume shared incomes and budgets for married households, and separate budgets for people who cohabit. Thus, individuals might be more likely to qualify for Medicare and Medicaid if they elect not to get married.

In the United States, the average cohabitation lasts less than 2 years and ends when the couple either separates or gets married. Interestingly, research indicates that cohabiting couples live differently, in many significant day-to-day aspects, than married couples. Those who cohabit typically have less clarity on the intention and direction of their relationship than those who are married. Likewise, researchers report lower commitment levels among cohabiting couples. Additionally, and on average, married adults are happier and otherwise have greater psychological well-being than cohabiting adults. (That said, cohabitators typically fare better psychologically than adults not living with anyone.) Finally, among young adults, intimate partner or domestic violence is more common among cohabiting couples than it is among married or dating couples.

When or if cohabiters marry, their divorce risks are over two times higher than those who never cohabited. As Susan I. Brown (2005: 34) notes, this apparent consequence is ironic:

The primary reason people cohabit is to test their relationship’s viability for marriage. Sorting out bad relationships through cohabitation is how many people think they can avoid divorce. Yet, living together before marriage actually increases a couple’s risk of divorce.

Two possible reasons could account for this result. First, cohabitation may change the relationship between a couple, increasing the chance they will divorce if they get married. In one scientific study of over 1,000 married men and women in the United States, it was revealed that those who cohabited before engagement or marriage reported significantly lower quality marriages and a greater possibility for separating than other couples. Second, individuals who

are willing to live together without being married may not be very committed to the idea of marriage and, thus, may be more willing to divorce if they are unhappy in their eventual marriage.

Significantly, there are people who cohabit more than once. Serial cohabiters are people who have a series of cohabiting relationships over the course of time. These people tend to be poorer and less educated than those who do not engage in serial cohabitation and those who elect to marry.

5.2 Selection of Marriage Partners

There is wide cross-cultural variation in the social rules that govern the selection of marriage partners. In some communities, partner selection is an individual decision, while in others it is a collective decision made by the partners' kin groups. Among different cultures, there is also variation in the rules regulating whom individuals can choose to marry.

In the United States and many other societies, individuals tend to practice endogamy, marrying someone within one's own social category or group (e.g., an individual of the same race, religion, social class, etc.). Endogamy helps reinforce the social status of the two people marrying and to pass it on to any children whom they may have.

In other societies, individuals practice exogamy, marrying across social categories or groups. Historically exogamy has helped strengthen alliances among villages or even whole nations; consider, for example, the royalty of Europe. Yet, as Shakespeare's (1993) great tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* reminds us, exogamous romances and marriages can sometimes provoke hostility among friends and relatives of the couple—and even among complete strangers. Racial intermarriages, for example, are exogamous marriages, and in the United States they were illegal in some states until *Loving v. Virginia* overturned laws prohibiting them.

Romantic Marriage

In the United States, there is a heavy emphasis on romantic love as the foundation for marriage; however, according to Andrew Cherlin, a sociologist and expert on marriage in the United States, this has not always been the case. Cherlin (1996) describes the three eras of marriage in the United States in this way: from the time of the creation of the United States until the early 20th century, among European-Americans institutionalized marriage, in which unions were rooted in the pursuit of economic and familial stability, was a common marital form. Companionate marriage, which emphasizes companionship, love, affection, and sex, emerged as the American economy industrialized and improved. Individualistic marriage evolved with continued economic growth and the increase in women's equality. In this marital form, partners are expected to be expressive and communicative, offering support and encouragement to each other as they endeavor to achieve their best selves.

Arranged Marriage

An arranged marriage is an agreement in which both parties consent to the assistance of their parents (or a third party) in the selection of a marital partner. Arranged marriage has deep roots in the behavior of royal and aristocratic families around the world. Today, arranged marriage is largely practiced in South Asia (India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka), Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. To some extent, it also occurs in parts of East Asia and among immigrants, from the aforesaid countries, in Western nations.

Forced Marriage

Forced marriage is a term used to describe a marriage in which one or both parties is married without consent (i.e., against his or her will). At times, a forced marriage can follow an unplanned pregnancy, as some cultures and religions consider it a moral imperative to marry in such a situation. This is based on the reasoning that premarital sex and out-of-wedlock births are sinful and should be outlawed or stigmatized.

In some societies, the custom of bride kidnapping—in which a woman is captured for marriage by a man and his friends—still exists. This practice occasionally exists to conceal an elopement; more frequently, however, it is a form of sexual violence.

5.3 Marriage Structures

Regardless of the marriage selection process, what are the most typical marriage structures? Across the world, the most culturally preferred marriage type today is monogamy, which permits only one spouse at a time. Since the original colonies in the 1600s, almost all who have married in the United States have done so monogamously.

Polygyny is the most common form of polygamy in the world's history. Polygyny is still common and legal in many African, Middle-Eastern, Muslim, and Indian nations. Polyandry is historically and currently rare, and, if or when it is practiced, it often includes the marriage of one wife to a set of brothers. Polyandry has been found in some Pacific Island cultures and within some pre-Taliban communities in Afghanistan.

What if a person marries, divorces, marries, divorces, etc.? Serial monogamy is the process of establishing an intimate marriage or cohabiting relationship that eventually dissolves and is followed by another intimate marriage or cohabiting relationship that eventually dissolves, etc. Thus, while polygamists have multiple spouses simultaneously, serial monogamists have multiple spouses in a sequence of relationships. Millions of American adults will experience serial marriages (and divorces).

5.4 Marriage in the United States

Notably, there are distinct trends in marriage in the United States. According to the United States Census Bureau, 2,077,000 marriages occurred in the United States in 2009. For Americans, the median age at first marriage has increased in recent years: in the early 1970s, it was 21 for women and 23 for men; in 2009, it rose to 26 for women and 28 for men.

Additionally, most American marriages (96.1%) are intra-racial (i.e., between people of the same race), with only 3.9% of marriages between people of different races (interracial). As small as that figure is, it is still three times greater than the 1.3% of marriages that were interracial in 1980. Further reflecting changes in this trend is that, among new marriages in 2008, almost 15% were interracial (Chen 2010). This increase is also reflected in dating patterns, as more than half of African Americans, Hispanic/Latino Americans, and Asian Americans have dated someone from a different racial/ethnic group (Qian 2005). Notably, more than half of married Asian Americans and Native Americans are in an interracial marriage, compared to about 40% of Hispanic/Latino Americans, 10% of African Americans, and 4% of white Americans. These percentages heavily reflect the numbers of people in each racial group. For instance, because there are so many white Americans, more than 90% of all interracial marriages involve a white spouse.

Globally, Americans also seem to have a unique preference and propensity for marriage. In fact, the United States has a higher rate of marriage than any other Western nation. As of 2006, 55.7% of Americans aged 18 and over were married. According to the 2008-2010 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates, American males over the age of 15 marry at a rate of 51.5% and American females over the age of 15 marry at a rate of 47.7%.

In the United States, there are a plethora of social benefits that follow marriage. In 2001, a sociologist named Linda Waite co-wrote a book with Maggie Gallagher called, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better off Financially*. Some of the benefits of marriage that are cited in the book include:

- Better physical and emotional health
- More wealth and income
- Positive social status
- More and safer sex
- Life-long continuity of intimate relationships
- Safer circumstances for children
- Longer life expectancy
- Lower odds of being crime victims
- Enhanced legal and insurance rights and benefits (tax, medical, and inheritance)
- Higher self-reported happiness

The National Survey of Family Growth confirms the health benefits of marriage, citing better mental and physical health outcomes, longer lives, higher rates of health insurance coverage, and

a lower prevalence of cardiovascular disease among married Americans. Marriage has also been shown to reduce stress, diminish the likelihood of suicide, and lead to less illness and addiction.

Tax filings also confirm the financial benefits of marriage. For instance, married Americans have consistently higher annual incomes than single people. In 2007, specifically, married men earned \$28,231 more in income than single men, and married women earned \$42,293 more than single women. This difference is even more pronounced if both incomes are taken into account: in 2007, dual-income married couples earned \$42,077 more than single men and \$56,139 more than single women.

Married couples report more social support, relational continuity, and relational commitment, as well. They also tend to adopt clearer life-long goals and be more likely to buy homes, invest, and plan for retirement.

Yet, experiences within marriages certainly vary. In fact, it might be more accurate to say that good marriages are beneficial, because bad marriages certainly are not (Frech and Williams 2007). Likewise, the benefits of marriage seem to be greater for older than younger American adults, for white Americans than African Americans, and for individuals who were psychologically depressed before marriage than for those who were not depressed (Frech and Williams 2007).

In 1972, sociologist Jessie Bernard (1972) famously said that every marriage includes a “her marriage” and a “his marriage.” By this she meant that husbands and wives view and define their marriages differently. When spouses from the same marriage are interviewed, they tend to disagree on such things as how often they should have sex, how often they actually do have sex, and who does various household tasks. Bernard’s research indicated that women do most of the housework and child care, while men felt freer to work and do other things outside the home. As a result, and citing various other studies, she argued that marriage is wholly better for men than it is for women. One example of this is that, while married men tend to have better psychological well-being than unmarried men, married women tend to have poorer mental health than unmarried women. Critics later argued with Bernard’s findings, claiming that she misinterpreted her data on women and that married women are also better off than unmarried women (Glenn 1997).

5.5 Staying Single

Gay or straight, another option for Americans is simply to stay single. In 2010, there were 99.6 million unmarried individuals over age eighteen in the United States, accounting for 44% of the total adult population (U.S. Census 2011). In 2010, never-married individuals in the twenty-five to twenty-nine age-bracket accounted for 62% of women and 48% of men, up from 11% and 19%, respectively, in 1970 (U.S. Census 2011). Single or never-married individuals are found in higher concentrations in large cities or metropolitan areas, with New York City being one of the highest.

Although both single American men and single American women report social pressure to get married, American women are subject to greater scrutiny when they make the choice to stay single. Single women are often portrayed as unhappy “spinsters” or “old maids” who cannot find a person to marry them. Single men, on the other hand, are typically portrayed as lifetime bachelors who cannot settle down or simply “have not found the right person.” Single women report feeling insecure and displaced in their families when their single status is disparaged (Roberts 2007). However, single women older than thirty-five report feeling secure and happy with their unmarried status, as many women in this category have found success in their education and careers. In general, women today feel more independent and more prepared to live a large portion of their adult lives without a spouse or domestic partner (Roberts 2007).

The decision to marry or not to marry can be based a variety of factors including religion and cultural expectations. Notably, being single is not necessarily a rejection of marriage; rather, it is a lifestyle that does not include marriage. By age forty, according to U.S. Census figures, 20% of women and 14% of men will have never married (U.S. Census Bureau 2011).

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6-Parenting⁷

Parenting is the process of nurturing, caring for, socializing, and preparing one's children for their eventual adult statuses and roles. Parenting is a universal family experience that spans across the history of the human family and every culture in the world.

6.1 Becoming a Parent

Most women and men in the United States become parents at some point in their adult lives. This might include parenting a birth child, adopted child, step child, foster child, or unrelated child. Studies indicate that the majority of 18- to 29-year-olds want to have children, believing that being a good parent is one of the most important things in life (Wang and Taylor 2011). Yet, while research indicates that parenting *is* one of the most fulfilling things a person can do (Gallup and Newport 1990), having children also seem to reduce American parents' emotional well-being. A recent review summarized this evidence:

Parents in the United States experience depression and emotional distress more often than their childless adult counterparts. Parents of young children report far more depression, emotional distress and other negative emotions than non-parents, and parents of grown children have no better well-being than adults who never had children (Simon 2008: 41).

One reason for this is that parenting can be both stressful and expensive. Depending on household income, the average child costs parents between \$134,000 and \$270,000 from birth until age 18. A child's college education can cost parents tens of thousands of dollars beyond that, as well. Robin W. Simon (2008) argues that American parents' stress would be reduced if the government provided better and more affordable day care and after-school options, flexible work schedules, and tax credits for various parenting costs. She also thinks that the expectations Americans have of the joy of parenthood are unrealistically positive and that parental stress would be reduced if expectations became more realistic.

Birth

Over the last few decades, nearly four million live births were recorded annually in the United States. About 40% of those are first births to a mother, and about 60% of all births in the United States are to mothers aged 15-29 years old.

⁷ This chapter integrates text from Laff and Ruiz (2021), Lang (2020), OpenStax (2017), *Sociology* (2016), and *Boundless Sociology* (n.d.).

Today, women in the United States have fewer children than they did before. In the early 1900s, the average fertility rate of women in the United States was about seven children; this average has declined significantly, remaining relatively stable at 2.1 since the 1970s (Hamilton, Martin, and Ventura 2011; Martinez, Daniels, and Chandra 2012).

Americans are having children at older ages, too. For this reason, and others, some people require medical help to achieve pregnancy. The number of Americans who become parents through assisted reproductive technology (methods that utilize medical technology to achieve conception and birth) is thus increasing, as well.

Foster Care

Foster care is a system in which a minor is placed into a group home (residential child care community, treatment center, etc.), private home of a state-certified caregiver (referred to as a “foster parent”), or with a family member approved by the state. The placement of the child is normally arranged through the government or a social service agency. The group home or foster/approved parent is typically compensated for expenses related to this care. In the United States, on any given day, there are more than 400,000 youth living in foster care primarily due to abuse and/or neglect. Many of these children will eventually be reunited with their parents, reestablishing custody.

Adoption

Adoption, the legal transfer of parental rights of a child to another person, can occur in many ways and elicit a wide variety of family types. In the United States, adoption statistics and estimates are based on U.S. Census data and other sources, and they indicate that approximately 2-4% of all Americans are adopted.

In the United States, children tend to be adopted through private arrangements, foster care, or international adoption (Adopted Children 2012). In the case of private adoption, it is common for birth parents to choose their baby’s adoptive parents; in some cases, adoptive and birth family members maintain some contact with each other after the adoption. Across the American foster care system, 100,000 youth are eligible for adoption given their biological parents’ loss of permanent legal rights and custody. The average age of youth waiting to be adopted from foster care is eight years old. In an international adoption, a child who is born in one country is adopted by a family who lives in another country. Often, that child was decreed an orphan before their adoption.

Children can also be adopted by a relative, such as an aunt, uncle, sister, brother, grandparent, or other relation. Additionally, after a divorce or in the case of same-sex marriages, children can be adopted by one parent’s spouse, if that spouse agrees to take full responsibility for the child.

Adoption might also be required in situations utilizing assisted reproductive technology, as well. In most American states, the legal transfer of parental rights is required when Americans become parents through the sperm and egg of another couple and/or when a surrogate mother carries a fertilized egg in utero. In both cases, the intended parent(s) adopt(s) the child after birth.

6.2 Parenting Outside of Marriage

In all of its forms of becoming, parenting does not require marriage. In fact, one recent trend that illustrates the changing nature of American families is the rise in single-parent households. The 1960 U.S. Census reported that 9% of children were dependent on a single parent; in contrast, the 2000 U.S. Census reported that 28% of children were dependent on a single parent. This spike was caused by an increase in unmarried pregnancies (36% of all births occur to unmarried women), as well as the increasing rate of divorce.

The proportion of families with children under 18 that have only one parent varies significantly by race and ethnicity: Hispanic/Latino American and African American families are more likely than white and Asian American households to be headed by only one parent. It also varies significantly by education, with college-educated women more likely to be married upon the birth of a child. The prevalence of mother as primary caregiver in a single-parent household is consistent across these differences, however, as are the financial ramifications of households headed by single mothers. In the United States, 27% of single mothers live below the poverty line, and, while the public is largely sympathetic to low-wage-earning single mothers, government benefits accorded them are fairly low. As a result, many single mothers seek assistance by living with another adult, such as a relative, fictive kin, or significant other.

Sociologists are also interested in childbearing/rearing trends among cohabiters. While roughly 55% of cohabiting couples have no biological children, approximately 45% live with a biological child of one of the partners and 21% live with their own biological child. (These figures add up to more than 100% because many couples live with their own child and a child of just one of the partners.) About 5% of children live with biological parents who are cohabiting.

Recent research has begun to compare the attitudes and behavior of children whose biological parent or parents are cohabiting rather than married (Apel and Kaukinen 2008; Brown 2005). In comparison to children of married parents, the children of cohabiting parents tend to exhibit lower well-being of various types: they are more likely to engage in delinquency and other antisocial behavior, and they have lower academic performance and worse emotional adjustment. The reasons for these differences need to be clarified, but they may stem more from parental characteristics than cohabitation.

6.3 Same-Sex Parents

The number of same-sex couples has grown significantly in the past decade. The United States Census Bureau recently reported 594,000 same-sex-couple households in the United States, a 50% increase from 2000. Approximately 31% of same-sex couples are raising children, which is not far from the 43% of opposite-sex couples raising children (U.S. Census 2009). Of the children in same-sex-couple households, 73% are the biological children of one of the parents, 21% are adopted, and 6% are a combination of biological and adopted (U.S. Census 2009).

While some socially-conservative groups express concerns regarding the well-being of children who grow up in same-sex-couple households, research indicates that same-sex parents are as effective as opposite-sex parents. In fact, in an analysis of 81 parenting studies, sociologists found no quantifiable data to support the notion that opposite-sex parenting is any better than same-sex parenting. Children of lesbian couples, however, were shown to have slightly lower rates of behavioral problems and higher rates of self-esteem (Biblarz and Stacey 2010).

6.4 Parenting and the Care and Socialization of Children

Parents function as guardians of their children's lives. They act as the adult decision-makers in many matters of importance to their children, like selecting schools, medical care, teams, daycare, and a myriad of other services. They also function as mediators between their children and the community at large, acting in defense of their children if misbehaviors are an issue and advocating for their children's best interests. Parents typically protect, feed, and provide personal care for their children from birth through adulthood.

Parents raise children according to their parenting paradigm. Parenting paradigms are conceptual patterns or ideas that provide the basis of a parent's strategies in their status as a parent. These paradigms can be habitual, based on how the parent was (or was not) parented as a child. They can also be formal, derived from self-help books or education. These paradigms also tend to come from how parents define their parenting status, what they are trying to accomplish in the long run, and the feedback they receive as they perform their status-based roles or behaviors.

One source of parental feedback is children. Parenting is bidirectional, with children influencing how parents actually parent. Child characteristics, such as birth order, temperament, and health status, can affect parenting and parental statuses/roles. For instance, an infant with an easy temperament may encourage feelings of parental efficacy, which are self-perpetuating. In contrast, parents with cranky or fussy infants can often feel frustrated and inadequate, which can lead to more punitive and less patient interactions.

Culture also helps to define parenting actions and expectations. For example, parents often have goals for their children that are partially culturally informed; for example, the extent to which parents encourage independent living and individual achievement among their children is certainly mediated by the values, norms, and beliefs of their culture.

With all of that said, however, it is important to remember that parenting roles and responsibilities are also derived from national and international laws and policies. The law considers parents to be simultaneously accountable for the nature of their parenting efforts *and* legally entitled to rights and privileges that support and protect them in these efforts. Parents are not at liberty to treat their children beyond the bounds of state and local laws, but, within those laws, they have tremendous freedom to parent according to their conscience and experiences.

Following are a few of the expectations of parents, which are found (and often codified or written into law) across many contemporary cultures:

- Provision of safety and sustenance, including adequate food, housing, clothing, medical care, and protection from harm in a multitude of contexts (e.g., neighborhood, household, etc.)

- Provision of socioemotional support, including the presence of warm and positive responsiveness, affection, communication, expectations, affirmations, encouragement, emotional regulation, guidance, discipline, and modeling of appropriate behaviors
- Provision of stimulation/instruction, including encouragement of achievement and learning through exposure to developmentally-appropriate and culturally-enriching experiences
- Provision of supervision, including the monitoring of whereabouts, communications, and activities, the collection of information from various sources, and the maintenance of ongoing and reciprocal communication with children
- Provision of structure, including support for connections to communities, relatives, friends, peers, and institutions

Socialization

By functioning as caregivers of the next generation of adults, parents also play a crucial role in a society's endurance and success. More specifically, parents function as agents of socialization for their children. As defined in an earlier chapter, socialization is the process by which people learn to be a member of a culture. Through socialization, a child comes to understand social norms and learn/accept their society's ideologies and values. Children also learn that they belong to and can depend on others to meet their needs, and that privileges and obligations accompany their membership in a family and community.

For the average American child, it is safe to say that the most important period of socialization takes place early in life, beginning at birth and moving forward until the beginning of school. Primary socialization includes all of the ways a child is molded into a social being capable of interacting in and meeting the expectations of society. On a practical level, primary socialization includes instruction on hygiene skills, manners, exercise, work, entertainment, sleep, eating patterns, study skills, and more. It also includes all of the ways in which parents show children how to use objects (such as clothes, computers, eating utensils, books, bikes); relate to others (some as "family," others as "friends," still others as "strangers" or "teachers" or "neighbors"); and perceive and navigate the world (what is "real" and what is "imagined").

In childhood, children also experience anticipatory socialization, wherein they acquire the cultural content needed for future social positions. For example, in "playing pretend," children prepare to be doctors or lawyers and to set up homes and dress accordingly. Parents often occupy a significant place in such play. Sociologists recognize that class, race, gender, religion, and other categorical social variables mediate parents' socialization of children. For instance, sociologist Melvin Kohn found that working-class and middle-class parents tend to socialize their children very differently. According to Kohn (1969), working-class parents tend to hold jobs in which they have little autonomy and are told what to do and how to do it. In such jobs, obedience is an important value, lest the workers be punished for not doing their jobs correctly. Thus, working-class parents often emphasize obedience and respect for authority as they raise their children. In contrast, as middle-class parents tend to hold white-collar jobs where autonomy, creativity, and independent judgment are valued, they tend to emphasize children's development of independence.

Scholars have also studied parents' racial socialization of their children. One interesting finding is that African American parents differ in the degree of racial socialization they practice: some parents emphasize African American identity and racial prejudice to a considerable degree, while other parents mention these topics to their children only occasionally. Sociologist Jason E. Shelton (2008) analyzed data from a

national random sample of African Americans to determine the reason for these differences. Significantly, Shelton found that African Americans were more likely to engage in racial socialization if they: were older, female, and living outside the American south; perceived that racial discrimination was a growing problem and were members of civil rights organizations aimed at helping African Americans; had higher incomes. While Shelton's study helps us to understand the factors that account for differences in racial socialization by African American parents, it also allows us to see that parents who do attempt to make their children aware of race relations are merely trying, as most parents do, to help their children get ahead.

Gender also matters to childhood socialization. For example, many studies find that parents raise their daughters and sons quite differently: parents are often gentler with their daughters and rougher with their sons, giving their girls dolls to play with and their boys guns. Parents' gender also matters to processes of childhood socialization. In Sweden, where government policy provides subsidized maternal/paternal leave, stay-at-home fathers are an accepted part of the social landscape: close to 90 percent of Swedish fathers use their paternity leave (about 340,000 dads), taking, on average, seven weeks of leave per birth (The Economist 2014). How do you think American policies—and our society's expected gender roles—compare? How will Swedish children be socialized to parental gender norms differently, as a result of this policy?

As these examples indicate, parents do not socialize their children in a vacuum. In fact, many social factors affect the way parents raise their children. Additionally, children are also socialized by agents other than their parents, like peers, media, sports teams, and more.

6.5 Parenting Adult Children

Just because children grow up does not mean that their parents stop parenting them. That said, while the concept of family persists across the entire lifespan, the specific statuses and roles of its members change over time. One major change comes when a child reaches adulthood and moves away. When, exactly, children leave home varies greatly depending on societal norms and expectations, as well as on economic conditions such as employment opportunities and affordable housing options. Some parents may experience sadness when their adult children leave the home—a situation known as the empty nest.

Around the world today, many parents find that their grown children are struggling to achieve independence. It's an increasingly common story: a child goes off to college and, upon graduation, is unable to find steady employment. In such instances, a frequent outcome is for the child to return home, becoming a "boomerang kid." The boomerang generation, as the phenomenon has come to be known, refers to young adults, mostly between the ages of 25 and 34, who return home to live with their parents while they strive to achieve stability in their lives. These boomerang kids can be both good and bad for families. Within American families, 48% of boomerang kids report having paid rent to their parents, and 89% say they help out with household expenses—a win for everyone involved (Parker 2012). On the other hand, 24% of boomerang kids report that returning home hurt their relationship with their parents (Parker 2012).

In addition to middle-aged parents spending more time, money, and energy taking care of their adult children, they are also increasingly responsible for their own aging and ailing parents. Middle-aged people in this set of circumstances are commonly referred to as the sandwich generation (Dukhovnov and Zagheni 2015). Of course, cultural norms and practices again come into play. In some Asian and Hispanic/Latino cultures, the expectation is that the adult children will take care of aging parents and

parents-in-law. In other cultures—particularly Western cultures that emphasize individuality and self-sustainability—the expectation has historically been that elders either [age in place](#), modifying their home and receiving services to allow them to continue to live independently, or enter long-term care facilities. However, given financial constraints, many families find themselves taking in and caring for their aging parents, increasing the number of extended-family [households](#) around the world.

6.6 Voluntary Childlessness

Voluntary childlessness is a phenomenon defined by/as: people of childbearing age who are fertile and do not intend to have children; people who have chosen sterilization; and/or people past childbearing age who were fertile but chose not to have children. Individuals can also be “temporarily childless” but want children in the future.

In most societies and for much of human history, choosing not to have children was both difficult and undesirable. Yet, the availability of reliable contraception and abortion, as well as the support provided the elderly by social-security systems, has made voluntary childlessness an appealing option for many people in developed nations. According to 2004 U.S. Census data, the proportion of childless American women 15 to 44 years old was 44.6%, up from 35% in 1976.

While younger women are more likely to be childless, older women are more likely to state that they intend to remain childless in the future. Thus, age plays a significant role in the decision to not have children. Likewise, the higher a woman’s income, the less likely she is to have children: nearly half of women with annual incomes over \$100,000 are childless. Unmarried women are also less likely than married women to be childless. Lastly, the chance of being childless increases with education and is far greater for never-married women.

Many societies place a high value on parenthood in adult life, so the voluntarily childless are often stereotyped as being “individualistic” people who avoid social responsibility and are less committed to helping others. That said, with the advent of environmentalism and concerns for the stewardship of the earth, the voluntarily childless are also sometimes recognized as helping reduce the human impact on our world.

Childfree social groups first emerged in the 1970s; in North America, the most notable among them are The National Organization for Non-Parents and No Kidding! To date, numerous books have been written about childfree people, and a range of social positions related to childfree interests have developed along with political and social activism in support of these interests.

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7-Divorce and Remarriage⁸

Divorce is the final termination of a marital union, canceling the legal duties and responsibilities of marriage and dissolving the bonds of matrimony between the parties. While divorce laws vary considerably around the world, in most countries it requires the sanction of a court or other authority in a legal process. The legal process of divorce may also involve issues of alimony, child custody, child support, distribution of property, and division of debt. Between 1971 and 2011, several countries legalized divorce, the last one being Malta in 2011.

7.1 Types of Divorce

Although divorce laws vary among jurisdictions, there are two basic approaches to divorce: fault based and no-fault based. Under a no-fault divorce system, divorce requires no allegation or proof of fault of either party; the barest of assertions suffice. For example, in countries that require “irretrievable breakdown,” the mere assertion that the marriage has broken down will satisfy the judicial officer. By contrast, fault-based divorce systems require proof by one party that the other party has committed an act incompatible with the marriage. This is termed “grounds” for divorce (popularly called “fault”), and it is the only way to terminate a marriage under a fault-based system.

Divorce mediation is an alternative to traditional divorce litigation. In a divorce mediation session, a mediator facilitates the discussion between the two parties by assisting with communication and providing information and suggestions to help resolve differences. At the end of the mediation process, the separating parties have typically developed a tailored divorce agreement that can be submitted to the court.

7.2 Divorce in the United States

There are a few myths about American divorce trends. For example, you might have heard the myth of the “seven-year itch,” where divorce happens prior to or shortly after the seventh year of marriage. In actuality, current government estimates indicate that about 75% of American couples make their ten-year anniversary in their first marriage.

Using National Center for Health Statistics data from 2003 that show a marriage rate of 7.5 (per 1000 people) and a divorce rate of 3.8, it would appear that exactly one half of all marriages fail (Hurley 2005). This reasoning is deceptive, however, because instead of tracing actual marriages to see their longevity (or lack thereof), this myth compares unrelated statistics: that is, the number of marriages in a given year does not have a direct correlation to the divorces occurring that same year. In research published in the *New York Times*, scholars of marriage and the family took a different approach—determining how many people had ever been married, and *of those*

⁸ This chapter integrates text from OpenStax (2017), *Sociology* (2016), Hammond and Cheney (2016), and *Boundless Sociology* (n.d.).

married couples, how many later divorced. The result? According to that analysis, American divorce rates have only ever gone as high as 41 percent (Hurley 2005).

While both of these myths are false, divorce does happen more often in the United States today than it did 50 years ago, and more people today are currently divorced than were currently divorced 50 years ago. In fact, the United States has a higher rate of divorce than any other Western nation: 41% of American marriages end in divorce after 15 years, compared to only 8% of marriage in Italy and Spain.

The American divorce rate spiked upward in the 1940s during WWII. After 1946, the divorce rate fell to steady low levels and remained there until the 1960s, when they slowly began to rise again. In 1960, divorce was generally uncommon, affecting only 9.1 out of every 1,000 married persons. That number more than doubled (to 20.3) by 1975, peaking in 1980 at 22.6 (Popenoe 2007). The dramatic increase in divorce rates after the 1960s has been associated with the liberalization of divorce laws and the increase in women entering the workforce (Michael 1978).

In the past, most states required couples to prove that one or both had committed actions such as mental cruelty, adultery, or other such behaviors in order to get divorced. Today almost all states have no-fault divorce laws, which allow a couple to divorce if they say their marriage has failed from irreconcilable differences. Because divorce has become easier and less expensive to obtain, more divorces likely occur.

Also, as more women entered the labor force in the 1960s and 1970s, they became more economically independent of their husbands, even if their jobs typically paid less than their husbands' jobs. When women in unhappy marriages become more economically independent, they are better able to afford to get divorced (Hiedemann, Suhomlinova, and O'Rand 1998). Likewise, when both spouses work outside the home, it becomes more difficult to juggle the many demands of family life, especially child care, which renders family life more stressful. Such stress can reduce marital happiness and make divorce more likely. Spouses may also have less time for each other when both are working outside the home, making it more difficult to deal with problems that may arise.

Over the last quarter century, the divorce rate in the United States has dropped steadily and is now similar to that of the 1970s. The more recent decrease in divorce can be attributed to two probable factors: an increase in the age at which people get married, and an increased level of education among those who marry—both of which have been found to promote greater marital stability.

7.3 Reasons for Divorce

Numerous studies have tried to determine why Americans divorce. While not conclusive, the predominate factors that lead marriages to end in divorce are infidelity, adultery, domestic violence, midlife crises, and addictions to alcohol and gambling.

Adultery is voluntary sexual intercourse between a married person and someone other than their lawful spouse. Historically, adultery has been considered a serious offense in many cultures. Even in jurisdictions where adultery is not a criminal offense, it may still have legal consequences, particularly in divorce cases. Domestic violence is defined as a pattern of abusive behaviors by one family member against another. A midlife crisis is a term that was coined by Elliott Jaques in 1965 that suggests it is a time when adults come to realize their own mortality; it often prompts sudden changes in behavior. Alcoholism is a broad term for problems with alcohol, and is generally used to mean compulsive and uncontrolled consumption of alcoholic beverages, usually to the detriment of the drinker's health, personal relationships, and social standing. Problem gambling is an urge to continuously gamble despite harmful negative consequences or the desire to stop.

Patterns in rates of divorce reveal that divorce also varies according to a number of significant categorical social variables. One such variable is age at marriage: teenagers who get married are much more likely to get divorced than people who marry well into their 20s or beyond. Delaying marriage until one is older or more experienced may provide more opportunity to choose a compatible partner, achieve financial stability, and reach emotional maturity.

Another major variable is marrying because of an unplanned pregnancy. Most babies born in the United States are born to a married couple; however, today, about 40% of babies are born to single mothers of all ages. Even though many of these single mothers eventually marry their baby's father, numerous studies have indicated that these marriages have a higher likelihood of ending in divorce.

Simply enduring the difficult times of marriage is associated with remaining married. The longer a couple is married, the lower their odds of divorce. The first three years of marriage require many adjustments for newlyweds. Of special mention is the process of transitioning into a cohesive couple relationship with negotiated financial, sexual, social, emotional, intellectual, physical, and spiritual rules of engagement. Most couples have many of these negotiations in place by years 7-10 of marriage.

There is also a geography factor in American divorce. Divorce rates tend to be lower in the North East and higher in the West. Nevada typically has the highest of all state divorce rates, but is often excluded from comparison because of the "Vegas marriage" or "Vegas divorce" effect. The South also has a high rate of divorce, likely because marriage rates are higher and marriage occurs at younger-than-average ages in this region.

Another correlate of divorce is social class: people who are poor at the time of their marriage are more likely to get divorced than people who begin their marriages in economic comfort, as the stress of poverty often causes stress in marriage. According to researchers participating in the University of Virginia's National Marriage Project, couples who enter marriage without a strong asset base (like a home, savings, and a retirement plan) are 70% more likely to be divorced after

three years than are couples with at least \$10,000 in assets. This finding is also connected to factors such as age and education levels, which tend to correlate with income.

A study from Radford University indicates that work mediates divorce, as well. Bartending is among the professions with the highest divorce rates (38.4%), with other traditionally low-wage industries (like restaurant service, custodial employment, and factory work) also associated with higher divorce rates (McCoy and Aamodt 2010).

The rate of divorce also varies by race. In a 2011 study of the 2009 American Community Survey, American Indian and Alaskan Natives reported the highest percentages of currently divorced individuals (12.6%), followed by African Americans (11.5%), white Americans (10.8%), Americans of Pacific Island heritage (8%), Hispanic/Latino Americans (7.8%), and Asian Americans (4.9%).

Additionally, decades of study have indicated that those who have ever cohabited have a higher likelihood of divorce. Also, the addition of children to a marriage has been shown to lead to divorce. Research has established that marriages enter their most stressful phase upon the birth of the first child (Popenoe and Whitehead 2010). This is particularly true for couples who have multiples (twins, triplets, and so on). Married couples with twins or triplets are 17% more likely to divorce than those with children from single births (McKay 2010).

7.4 Effects of Divorce

Extensive research exists on the effects of divorce on spouses and their children, yet scholars do not always agree on the nature of these effects. That said, one thing is clear: divorce tends to plunge women into poverty or near-poverty (Gadalla 2008). One-parent families headed by a woman are much poorer (\$30,296 in 2008 median annual income) than those headed by a man (\$44,358). Meanwhile, the median income of married-couple families is much higher (\$72,589). Almost 30% of all single-parent families headed by women are officially poor, according to standards set by the government.

Although the economic consequences of divorce seem clear, what are the psychological consequences for spouses and their children? Are they better off if a divorce occurs, worse off, or about the same? As stated above, the research evidence is very conflicting. Many studies find that divorced spouses are, on average, less happy and have poorer mental health after their divorce, but some studies find that happiness and mental health often improve after divorce (Williams 2003; Waite, Luo, and Lewin 2009). The post-divorce time period that is studied may affect what results are found: for some people, psychological well-being may decline in the immediate aftermath of a divorce but rise over the next few years. The contentiousness of the marriage may also matter. Some marriages that end in divorce were filled with hostility, conflict, and violence, while other marriages that end in divorce were not very contentious at all. Individuals seem to fare better psychologically after ending a very contentious marriage, but fare worse after ending a less contentious marriage (Amato and Hohmann-Marriott 2007).

Divorce is often justified by the notion that children are better off in a divorced family than in a family with parents who do not get along. However, long-term studies determine that to be generally untrue. Research suggests that while marital conflict does not provide an ideal childrearing environment, going through a divorce can have a significant impact on children. Whenever a couple divorces, children experience changes in the stability of their lives. For example, children often assume blame for the divorce, and they sometimes believe that they should try to get their parents back together. They also worry about being abandoned, as their core attachment to their parents has been violated. Additionally, children often become disillusioned with authority as they try to balance the way things ought to be with the way things actually are. In many cases, they become aware of ex-spouse tensions and realize that they, themselves, are the subject of some of them.

Children of divorced parents are reported to have a higher chance of behavioral problems than those of non-divorced parents, as well. Studies have reported the former to be more likely to suffer abuse than children in intact families, and to have a greater chance of living in poverty. Studies also find that children in divorced families are more likely, on average, to struggle in school, use drugs and alcohol, suffer from behavioral problems, and experience emotional distress and other psychological issues (Sun and Li 2009; Amato and Cheadle 2008).

Yet, it is sometimes difficult to determine whether the effects of divorce on children stem from the divorce, itself, or from the parental conflict that led to the divorce. This problem raises the possibility that children may fare better if their parents end a troubled marriage than if their parents stay married. The evidence on this issue generally mirrors the evidence for spouses: children generally fare better if their parents end a highly contentious marriage, but they fare worse if their parents end a marriage that has not been highly contentious (Booth and Amato 2001; Hull, Meier, and Ortyl 2010).

A child's ability to deal with a divorce may also depend on their age. Research has found that divorce may be most difficult for school-aged children, as they are old enough to understand the separation but not old enough to understand the reasoning behind it. Older teenagers are more likely to recognize the conflict that led to the divorce; however, they may still feel fear, loneliness, guilt, and pressure to choose sides. Infants and preschool-age children may suffer the heaviest impact from the loss of routine that the marriage offered (Temke 2006). The child's gender, personality, the amount of conflict experienced with/between the parents, and the support of family and friends all contribute to the effects of divorce on a child, as well.

Notably, divorce is thought to have a cyclical pattern. Children of divorced parents are 40% more likely to divorce than children of married parents. And when we consider those children whose parents divorced and then remarried, the likelihood of their own divorce rises to 91% (Wolfinger 2005). This might result from being socialized in/to a mindset that a broken marriage can be replaced rather than repaired (Wolfinger 2005). That sentiment is also reflected in the finding that when both partners of a married couple have been previously divorced, their marriage is 90% more likely to end in divorce (Wolfinger 2005).

Proximity to parents tends to make a difference in a child's well-being after divorce. Boys who live or have joint custody arrangements with their fathers show less aggression than those who are raised by their mothers alone. Similarly, girls who live or have joint custody arrangements with their mothers tend to be more responsible and mature than those who are raised by their fathers alone. Child custody and guardianship are terms that are used to describe the legal and practical relationship between a parent and their child, such as the right of the parent to make decisions for the child and the parent's duty to care for the child. Under family law, there are different types of custody. Alternating custody is an arrangement whereby the child lives for an extended period of time with one parent, and then for a similar amount of time with the other parent. While the child is with the one parent, that parent retains sole authority over the child. If a child lives with both parents, each parent shares joint physical custody and is said to be a "custodial parent." Thus, in joint physical custody arrangements, neither parent has sole authority over the child.

7.5 Remarriage and Stepfamilies

Remarriage is the legal union that follows the dissolution of a previous marriage for one or both spouses. Stepfamilies are formed when children from another marriage or relationship are brought into a family through a new marriage. Stepfamilies can form in any of the following ways: a wife or husband was married before; a wife or husband cohabited before; a wife or husband was a single parent before and a child from that previous relationship becomes a step-son or step-daughter. Step-children can be of any age. When a former emotionally or legally significant relationship existed for a current spouse, it creates a bi-nuclear family, or a family with two core adult relationships formed around the original adults who are no longer together.

People in a second marriage account for approximately 19.3% of all married persons, and those who have been married three or more times account for 5.2% (U.S. Census 2011). The vast majority (91%) of remarriages occur after divorce; only 9% occur after the death of a spouse (Kreider 2006). Most men and women remarry within five years of a divorce, with the median length for men (three years) being lower than for women (4.4 years). This length of time has been fairly consistent since the 1950s. The majority of those who remarry are between the ages of 25-44 (Kreider 2006).

Marriage the second time around (or third or fourth) can be a very different process than the first. Remarriage lacks many of the classic courtship rituals of a first marriage. In a second marriage, individuals are less likely to deal with issues like parental approval, premarital sex, or desired family size (Elliot 2010). In a survey of households formed by remarriage, a mere 8% included only biological children of the remarried couple. Of the 49% of homes that include children, 24% included only the woman's biological children, 3% included only the man's biological children, and 9% included a combination of both spouse's children (U.S. Census 2006).

When someone is on the marriage-market they look for a homogamous mate who survives the filtering process and with whom they establish compatibility. But, remarriers filter with a specific

and unique lens in comparison to never marrieds: they look for someone who is not the same person they just divorced. They especially try to find someone who they perceive will do for them what their ex could not or would not do. And, like all persons on the marriage-market, remarriers look to maximize their rewards while minimizing their losses or costs.

Remarried couples who have no children experience much less complexity in their new marriage because the ex-spouse can be out of sight and mind: they have no visitation disputes, child support, nor holiday complexities with which to contend. Remarried couples with children from other relationships experience much more complexity, in comparison. The ex-spouse gets co-parental influence that can easily spill into the marriage boundary if not properly guarded.

What are the strategies that are known to work in these newly-created families? One core strategy is to recognize and deal with the events that brought all the stepfamily members together. Step-children and remarried parents likely have some grief that lingers from the divorce. It is important to remember that feeling grief for a loss does not undermine the current family system. In fact, if it's within the current stepfamily that the healing takes place, it can often strengthen the newly formed family as the sense of group cohesion grows.

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8-Family Stressors and Strengths⁹

Families are functional at some levels and simultaneously dysfunctional at others. Family functions are the tasks and goals that support and sustain the family. Family dysfunctions are failures in the family to accomplish these tasks and goals. Family dysfunctions can be handed down from generation to generation, with few family members aware that something is wrong in the family system. Both concepts are intimately related to the stressors and strengths of families.

8.1 Family Stressors

There are a variety of stressors that families might deal with over the life course. Normative stressors are expected life events and processes that bring stress by virtue of their nature. Having a baby, getting a new job, and buying a home are all normative stressors experienced at the early stage of the life course. For families in the middle of the life course, normative stressors might include the return of children to the home, the death of parents and siblings, and the impending aging process. Elderly families experience more freedoms but also face the sober realities of their biological health.

Acute stressors are typically unexpected and sudden, and coping with them can demand tremendous resources. Bankruptcies, illnesses, crime victimization, loss, and natural hazards are just a few of the acute stressors that could impact a family. Stressor pile up occurs when new stressors are added before existing stressors are resolved. Stressor pile up can be detrimental to families if adequate resources aren't available for resolution.

Family Violence

Violence and abuse are among the most disconcerting and impactful stressors faced by families. Abuse can occur between spouses, parents and children, and other family members. The frequency of violence within families is a difficult to determine because many cases go unreported.

Intimate Partner Violence

Domestic violence is a significant social problem in the United States. It is often characterized as violence between household or family members. When domestic violence occurs between spouses or partners, it is referred to as intimate partner violence (IPV). It is estimated that one in four women has experienced some form of IPV in her lifetime (compared to one in seven men) (Catalano 2007).

⁹ This chapter integrates text from Lang (2020), Pearce (2020), OpenStax (2017), *Sociology* (2016), Hammond and Cheney (2016), and *Boundless Sociology* (n.d.).

IPV may include physical violence, such as punching, kicking, or other methods of inflicting physical pain; sexual violence, such as rape or other forced sexual acts; threats and intimidation that imply either physical or sexual abuse; and emotional abuse, such as harming another's sense of self-worth through words or controlling another's behavior. IPV often starts as emotional abuse and then escalates to other forms or combinations of abuse (Centers for Disease Control 2012).

Two-thirds of nonfatal IPV occurs inside of the home; approximately 10 percent occurs at the home of the victim's friend or neighbor. The majority of abuse takes place between the hours of 6 p.m. and 6 a.m., and nearly half (42%) involves alcohol or drug use (Catalano 2007).

Of cases of IPV that involved physical actions against women in 2010, 57% involved physical violence only; 9% involved rape and physical violence; 14% involved physical violence and stalking; 12% involved rape, physical violence, and stalking; and 4% involved rape only (CDC 2011). Most cases of IPV against men involve physical violence (92%) (Catalano 2007).

As these statistics indicate, IPV affects different segments of the population at different rates. The rate of IPV for African American women (4.6 per 1,000 persons over the age of twelve) is higher than that for white American women (3.1). Yet, while both groups have experienced IPV at a relatively stable rate for decades, the rate of IPV has increased steadily among Native American and Alaskan Native women (Catalano 2007).

Gay and lesbian relationships have been identified as a risk factor for abuse in certain populations, as well. Yet, historically, little research interest has been conducted on IPV in same-sex relationships.

Couples who are separated report higher rates of IPV, as well. Likewise, couples who are cohabitating are more likely than those who are married to experience IPV (Stets and Straus 1990). Researchers have also found that the rate of IPV doubles for women in low-income disadvantaged areas (Benson and Fox 2004). Finally, and overall, women aged twenty to twenty-four years old are at the greatest risk of nonfatal abuse (Catalano 2007).

Notably, the relationship between gender and domestic violence is a controversial topic. Some observers claim that husbands are just as likely as wives to suffer from IPV, and there is some evidence to indicate that husbands suffer from IPV as often as do wives. Yet, this "gender equivalence" argument has been roundly criticized. Although women do commit IPV against husbands and boyfriends, this violence is usually committed in self-defense.

Why, specifically, do men hit their wives, partners, and girlfriends? Sociologists answer this question by citing both structural and cultural factors. Structurally, women are the subordinate gender in a patriarchal society and, as such, are more likely to be victims of IPV. As IPV is also more common in poor families, researchers believe that economic inequality might lead men to

take out their class-based frustrations on their wives and girlfriends (Martin, Vieraitis, and Britto 2006).

Cultural myths also help explain why men hit their wives and girlfriends (Gosselin 2010). Many men continue to believe that their wives should love, honor, and *obey* them; if they view their wives in this way, it becomes that much easier to abuse them.

People often ask why women do not leave home when victimized by IPV, implying that the violence can't be that bad if they stay. This reasoning ignores the fact that many women *do* try to leave home, which often angers their husbands and puts them more at risk. Additionally, it neglects to consider how many women have little money of their own and nowhere else to go (Kim and Gray 2008). Women's shelters are few in number, and many can only accommodate a woman and her children for 2 or 3 weeks.

Unfortunately, accurate statistics on IPV are difficult to determine, as it is estimated that more than half of nonfatal IPV goes unreported. Most victims studied stated that abuse had occurred for at least two years prior to their first report (Carlson, Harris, and Holden 1999). One study of IPV incident reports found that even when confronted by police about abuse, 29% of victims denied that abuse occurred (Felson, Ackerman, and Gallagher 2005). According to the National Criminal Victims Survey, victims cite various reasons why they are reluctant to report abuse.

Sometimes IPV is reported to police by a third party, but it still may not be confirmed by victims. Many people want to help IPV victims but are hesitant to intervene because they feel that it is a personal matter or because they fear retaliation from the abuser—reasons similar to those of victims who do not report IPV.

IPV has significant long-term effects on individuals involved and on society. Studies have shown that these impacts extend beyond the direct physical or emotional wounds. Among victims, protracted IPV has been linked to both unemployment and major depression (Goodwin, Chandler, and Meisel 2003). Female victims of IPV are also more likely to abuse alcohol or drugs, suffer from eating disorders, and attempt suicide (Silverman, et al. 2001). In reference to the 3.3 million American children who witness IPV each year, impacts include increased aggressiveness, anxiety, and changes in social interactions.

Child Abuse

Child abuse is the physical, sexual, or emotional mistreatment or neglect of a child or children. Different jurisdictions have developed their own definitions of what constitutes child abuse for the purposes of removing a child from their family and/or prosecuting a criminal charge.

Research indicates that girls (9.7 per 1,000 children) are slightly more likely to be abused than boys (8.7 per 1,000 children). The highest numbers of abuse cases tend to be found among 2-5-year-old children, with rates declining as children age. The majority (81.2%) of perpetrators are parents; 6.2% are other relatives.

Child abuse occurs at all socioeconomic and education levels, and it crosses ethnic and cultural lines. Just as child abuse is often associated with stressors felt by parents, parents who demonstrate resilience to these stressors are less likely to abuse (Samuels 2011). Young parents are typically less capable of coping with stress, particularly the stress of becoming a new parent. Thus, teenage mothers are more likely to abuse their children than are their older counterparts (George and Lee 1997). Drug and alcohol use is another known contributor to child abuse. Children raised by parents with substance abuse disorders are three times more likely to be abused (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2011). Other risk factors include social isolation, depression, low parental education, and a parent's history of being mistreated as a child.

There are four major categories of child abuse: neglect, physical abuse, psychological and/or emotional abuse, and sexual abuse. Some children suffer from a combination of these forms of abuse. Neglect is a passive form of child abuse in which a care-giver fails to provide adequate care, specifically sufficient supervision, nourishment, and/or medical care. It is the most common type of abuse in the United States, accounting for over 60% of child abuse cases.

Physical abuse involves physical aggression directed at a child by an adult. Most nations with child-abuse laws consider the deliberate infliction of serious injuries, or actions that place a child at obvious risk of serious injury or death, to be illegal. Beyond this, however, there is considerable variation. In fact, the distinction between child discipline and abuse is often poorly defined. For example, while some American parents feel that physical discipline, or corporal punishment, is an effective way to respond to bad behavior, others feel that it is a form of abuse. According to a poll conducted by ABC News, 65% of Americans approve of spanking and 50% of Americans sometimes spank their child.

A parent's tendency toward physical punishment may be mediated by their culture and education. For example, American parents who live in the South are more likely than those who live in other regions to spank their child. Likewise, American parents who do not have a college education are also more likely to spank their child (Crandall 2011). Currently, 23 states officially allow spanking in the school system; however, parents may object and school officials must follow a set of clear guidelines when administering this type of punishment (Crandall 2011). Notably, and in general, studies have shown that spanking is not an effective form of punishment and may lead to aggression by the victim, particularly those who were spanked at a young age (Berlin 2009).

Out of all the possible forms of abuse, emotional abuse is the hardest to define. It can include name-calling, ridicule, degradation, destruction of personal belongings, torture or killing of a pet, excessive criticism, inappropriate or excessive demands, withholding communication, and routine labeling or humiliation.

Child sexual abuse is a form of child abuse in which an adult or older adolescent abuses a child for sexual stimulation and/or power and control. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry reported that 80,000 cases of child sexual abuse are reported each year in the United

States, with many more cases unreported. There is some gender variability in the phenomenon, however, with approximately 15-25% of American women and 5-15% of American men reporting sexual abuse as children.

Symptoms of sexual abuse in children include the following: avoiding or showing an unusual interest in things of a sexual nature; problems sleeping or having nightmares; signs of depression or becoming withdrawn from friends or family; seductive behavior; talk of their bodies as dirty; concern that there is something wrong with their genitals; refusal to go to school; delinquent behaviors; conduct problems; secrecy; aggression; suicidal behavior; and the illustration or representation of sexual molestation in drawings, games, or fantasies.

Children who experience any type of abuse may “act out” or respond in a variety of troubling ways. These may include acts of self-destruction, withdrawal, and aggression, as well as struggles with depression, anxiety, alcohol and drugs, and academic performance. Researchers have also found that abused children’s brains often produce higher levels of stress hormones. These hormones can lead to decreased brain development, lower stress thresholds, suppressed immune responses, and lifelong difficulties with learning and memory. Troublingly, approximately 30% of abused children will later abuse their own children (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2006). Yet, it is important to note that not all children who experience abuse and neglect have the same outcomes; there are many ways that stable, permanent, safe, secure, nurturing, and loving care can help children reduce and ward off the effects of abuse.

Elder Abuse

Research also indicates that a large number of elderly Americans are abused by younger family members. Family elder abuse is the maltreatment of older family members in emotional, sexual, physical, financial, neglectful, and other ways. Cooper, et al. (2008) estimate that 1 in 4 elderly people are at risk for abuse in Western Nations. In terms of financial abuse, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) estimates that \$2.6 billion dollars is lost each year in the financial abuse of American elders.

Women make up 60-76% of elder abuse victims, depending on the type of abuse. The elderly are also more likely to fall victim of abuse as they age; those over 80 years old are at an increased risk of abuse. Researchers estimate that only about one-sixth of elder-abuse incidents are reported.

Most states sponsor programs that intervene when elder abuse or neglect is suspected. Several programs have been developed to assist older adults who resist leaving their homes to move in with their (abusive) children. Home-bound elders may benefit from the attention of gatekeepers, or neighbors or service people like letter carriers, who keep an eye on them and intervene when a problem arises. All 50 states have elder abuse reporting procedures, such as toll-free hotlines. Adult Protective Services (APS) is the state or county agency that investigates elder abuse.

Poverty and Family Health, Wellness, and Stability

Another key stressor in family life is poverty. But how is family-based poverty defined? While there are multiple measures used, a common and shared one in the United States is the poverty threshold, also known as the poverty line. A government economist, Mollie Orshanky, first calculated the poverty line in 1963 by multiplying the cost of a very minimal diet by three, as a 1955 government study had determined that the typical American family spent one-third of its income on food. Thus, a family whose cash income is lower than three times the cost of a very minimal diet is considered officially poor. This way of calculating family poverty has not changed since 1963, although the amount is adjusted for inflation. As a result, many argue that it is an antiquated calculation. For example, numerous expenses—such as heat and electricity, child care, transportation, and health care—now occupy a greater percentage of the typical family’s budget than was true in 1963. In addition, this official measure ignores a family’s non-cash income from Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and tax credits. As a national measure, the poverty line also fails to take into account regional differences in the cost of living.

A recent study used poverty line data to describe current trends in childhood rates of poverty.⁵ Based on U.S. Census figures, this study indicated that, in 2008, 19% of persons below the poverty level were children. In the United States, 41% of children live in or near poverty. New Hampshire is the state with the lowest level of child poverty, with 8.6% of children living below the poverty line; Arizona is the state with the highest level of child poverty, with 26.2% of children living below the poverty line. Notably, childhood poverty is higher in the United States than it is in any other Western democracy, and poor children in the United States fare worse than their counterparts in other Western democracies (Jäntti 2009).

In the United States, children of color have a higher likelihood of living in poverty than do white children. Wight and Chau (2009) report that 27% of white American children, 61% of African American children, 31% of Asian American children, 57% of American Indian children, and 62% of Hispanic/Latino American children live in poverty. Of children who live just with their mothers, 44% are impoverished; this figure rises to 53% when we focus only on children those children who live with their mothers *and* are under the age of 6.

Extensive research documents that poor children are at increased risk for behavioral, psychological, and health problems in childhood and their adult years (Wagmiller and Adelman 2009). As a result, and in a type of vicious cycle, children growing up in poor households are at greater risk of continuing to live in poverty after they reach adulthood.

Notably, while families with incomes between the poverty line and twice the poverty line (or twice poverty) are barely making ends meet, they are not considered officially poor. For this reason, many analysts think families need incomes twice as high as the federal poverty level just to get by. They thus use twice-poverty data (i.e., family incomes below twice the poverty line) to provide a more accurate understanding of how many Americans face serious financial difficulties, even if they are not living in official poverty.

Related to poverty is the issue of food insecurity. In the United States, the rate of food insecurity for families has changed very little over time: the percentage of food insecure families was 12% in 1995 and 11.1% in 2018. To cope with food insecurity, many American families rely on SNAP benefits to provide food for their families. SNAP is a federal program that, in some states, is supplemented with local funds; it aims to supplement the food budget of families who are moving toward self-sufficiency.

According to the 2018 American Community Survey, 12.4% of people in the United States access SNAP benefits. The majority of families that do have at least one family member working; one-third of recipients have two family members working. Fraud is often mentioned as a concern when it comes to SNAP benefits, but when recipient and vendor fraud is totaled it equals less than 1% of all funds disbursed.

Children, in particular, are heavily impacted by food insecurity in the United States. A high-quality diet is a major contributing factor to children's health and wellbeing—and to their health outcomes as adults. Poor eating patterns in childhood are associated with obesity during childhood and adolescence, and obese children are more likely to become obese adults. Obesity leads to increased risks for a wide variety of chronic diseases, including diabetes, stroke, heart disease, arthritis, and some cancers.

Additionally, hungry children cannot learn as efficiently as well-nourished children. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), hungry children are more likely to develop anxiety and depression, and their brain development and information processing can be affected, as well.

In the United States, poverty can also be a barrier to safe water access. Challenges in poor communities include contaminated water supplies, housing with lead-infested water, other substandard plumbing issues, and unequal distribution of public drinking water (e.g., water fountains in schools and other public places).

Children are the most susceptible to the effects of lead-infested water. Lead poisoning can lead to many health issues, including anemia, slowed growth, and learning problems. Lead can also put pregnant women at risk for miscarriage, and cause organ failure in adults. High levels of lead have also cause death.

Poverty impacts a family's access to housing, as well. Housing is another word for the place that families go each night to find shelter from the physical elements and to access emotional safety. In the best-case scenarios, housing provides security and a place for families to love and nurture each other.

Price, availability, location, and macroeconomics all play a role in a family's ability to secure housing; however, income is the primary determining factor in a family's housing access. Therefore, inequities in income distribution directly affect housing access and a family's capacity to feel safe, secure, and able to meet their maximum potential.

It is common in the United States for families to have multiple wage-earners, with multiple jobs, and still struggle to afford adequate housing. One reason for this is the nation's crisis of affordable housing. Affordable housing is defined as housing that can be accessed and maintained while paying for and meeting other basic needs, such as food, transportation, clothing, and health care.

Given the lack of affordable housing in the United States, many Americans are rightly considered housing insecure. In fact, current estimates indicate that 10-15% of all Americans are housing insecure. Signs of housing insecurity include: missing a rent or utility payment; paying for housing but struggling to meet basic needs; experiencing formal or informal evictions and foreclosures; surfing couches; and moving frequently. It can also include exposure to health and safety risks, such as mold, vermin, lead, overcrowding, and abuse. Many families cope with housing insecurity by living with extended relatives.

In 2019, more than half a million Americans were considered homeless. Many of these Americans are children and youth. In early 2018, just over 180,000 people in 56,000 families with children experienced homelessness. Additionally, more than 36,000 young people (under the age of 25) were homeless on their own; most of those young people (89%) were between the age of 18 and 24 years old. Demographic factors that correlate with a higher rate of homelessness and housing insecurity include being female, transgender, Native American, African American, and Hispanic/Latino American.

Another poverty-related stressor for families is health care coverage or insurance. The United States Census Bureau reported that, in 2007, about 15.3% (or more than 45 million Americans) had no health care coverage. Significantly, nearly 11% of American children are without health insurance; of children in poverty, almost 18% lack coverage. This is difficult to justify in today's modern society: every wealthy country to which the United States compares (Western Europe, Australia, Japan, etc.) offers health insurance as a right to all.

8.2 Family Strengths

Despite all of the aforesaid stressors, the family is by far the most enduring and central institution in society. World surveys of human values continue to document the significance of the family to people worldwide. Billions of people around the world carry on traditions consistent with monogamous, polygamous, matriarchal, and patriarchal family forms. Lesbian and gay families have also become mainstream in many societies. Poor families, families of average incomes, and wealthy families continue to perform core family functions and generate future generations of children who will likely do the same.

In the United States, families are a significant source of satisfaction. The General Social Survey (GSS) is a national survey of Americans that has been conducted since 1972. When asked about how much satisfaction families bring to their lives, 43% of American respondents said a very great

deal, 34% said a great deal, and 11% said quite a bit. When asked, in general, how satisfied they were with their family, 90% of American respondents indicated satisfaction at some level.

Given this sustained model of family endurance, significance, and satisfaction, a wealth of research has been conducted to identify what strong families do to stay strong.

Traditions and Rituals

Ever wonder why family members keep asking you to attend the family picnic or reunion? What might they know that you don't? Perhaps they're aware that traditions and rituals are one way that families build connections between generations and create new memories. In fact, sociologists have long studied how traditions and rituals promote cohesion and adaptability in family systems, while also offering mutual support between nuclear and extended family members. Notably, these traditions and rituals can be as simple as eating three meals a day together, holding weekly movie parties, buying fresh doughnuts on Saturday morning, or reading together at bedtime.

Religion and Spirituality

Some family-based rituals are drawn from the world's major religions. Religion is a unified system of beliefs, rituals, and practices that typically involves a broader community of believers who share common definitions of the sacred and the profane. There are many religious holidays that serve as a source of strength for families. Spiritual rituals, independent of formal religion, can also do the same: family fasts, family prayers on behalf of others, family offerings made in hopes of receiving blessings, and family outings designed to get in touch with nature also serve to connect and cohere family members.

Family History

Families are also bound through the honoring of ancestral heritage. Family history is the process of documenting and cataloging one's own ancestral heritage. Millions of family members worldwide have begun personal family histories to pass down to their children and grandchildren. In fact, on the Internet, genealogy and family history searches account for the second most common Internet search topic today. (There are a number of family history websites, with ancestry.com being one of the largest and most comprehensive.) Many Americans who study and write down their family history share it with their children and grandchildren, creating bonds of unity that span the generations.

Quality Family Time

Another key strategy for family sustainability and satisfaction is spending quality time together. Work, school, friends, recreation, and entertainment often exact a distracting toll on family cohesion and adaptability. Interaction and conversation help to reinforce family loyalties and

affirmations. Proactive measures families can take to assure these strengths include: parental dating; romantic and kind gestures; united (and recorded) goals; the shared practice of stress management techniques; and seeking professional help. Humor and fun also help families bind together and weather the storms that come.

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