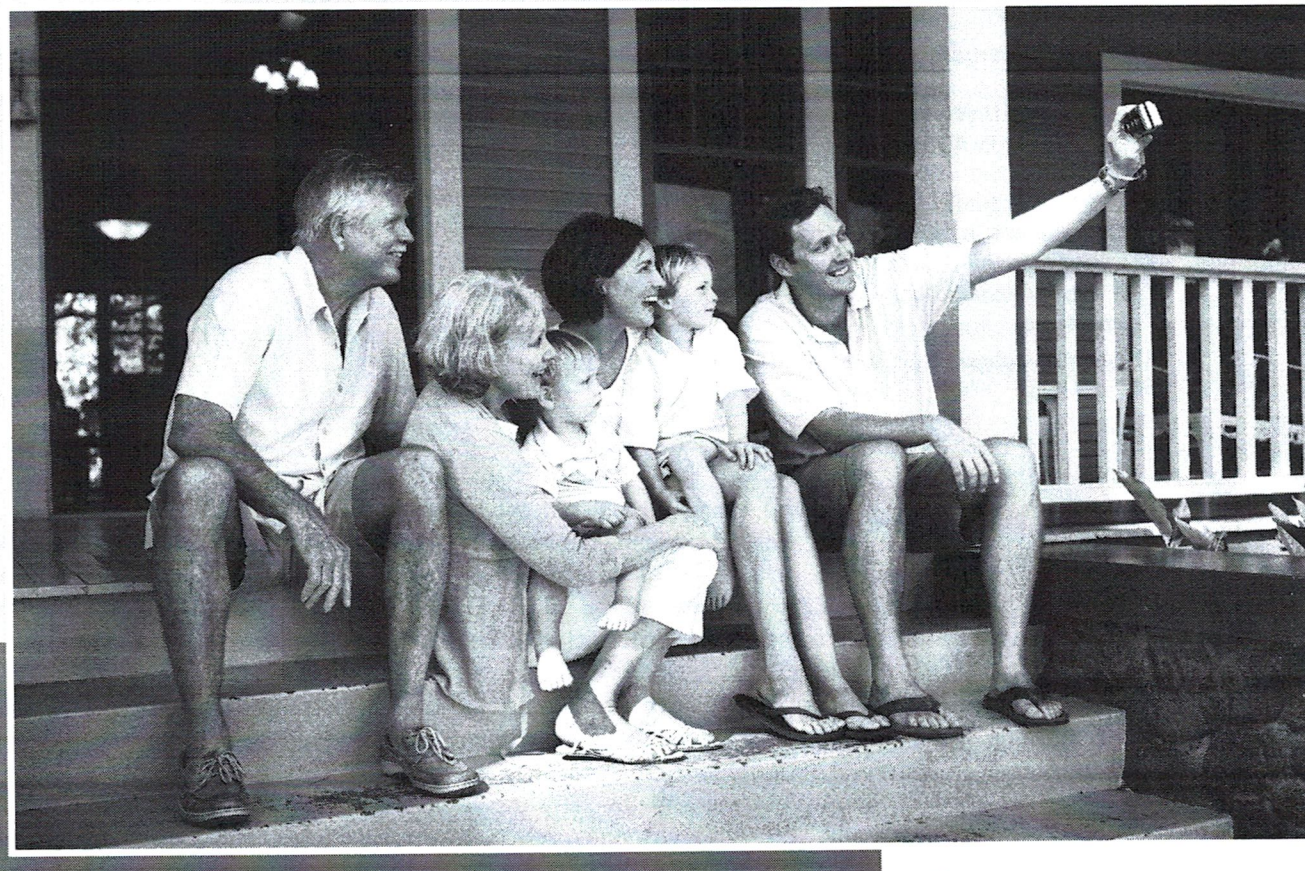

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chapter 1

Images, Ideals, and Myths

learning objectives:

- to understand the images and ideals related to families
- to understand images and reality of families
- to challenge the commonly held myths about families in society
- to develop a new framework for understanding families

Profound changes have reshaped families in recent years. Families today are very different from what they used to be. They are more diverse and more likely to be formed outside of marriage than in the past. They include a complex array of domestic arrangements, and they are more easily fractured. Family members spend less time together, and parents have less influence over their children. These changes are not unique to the United States. Indeed, they have global dimensions. Throughout the world, every industrialized country is experiencing the same changes. Women's growing economic independence, widespread divorce, and cohabitation have made marriage optional for many people.

Family change and diversity are now highly charged issues, under fire from many quarters. In recent years, few political issues have electrified domestic politics more than the purported breakdown of the family or same-sex marriage. Some believe that current developments are symptoms of growing social decay. They think the growing variability of marriage patterns and family forms signals the decline of the family and the moral fabric of society. Why do so many lament the state of the family? Why is "family" such a bitterly contested battleground? These are disquieting questions that highlight the public anxiety surrounding the state of contemporary families. In the current climate of rapid social change these questions have become politicized, with competing views of the family vying for public attention.

In this book we present a sociological view of family life in the United States. We ask students to call into question existing social arrangements that many people consider sacred. This requires us to expose the images and myths that influence our perceptions and to replace them with a more inclusive view of families and the social conditions that make families diverse. When we understand that families are embedded in larger social structures and growing economic inequalities, we have a better frame of vision for understanding the many different family forms that coexist in our society today.

To begin, we need to be aware that the family is as much a cultural symbol as it is a social form—as much idea as thing (Holstein and Gubrium, 1999:18). Most family images make it difficult to think about family life objectively. As much as we want to be objective, our perceptions are guided by cultural visions of family, by our own family experiences, and, paradoxically, by the very familiarity of family life. Virtually everyone has a family. We all consider ourselves experts on own families, yet we are too close to our families to see them dispassionately (Rosenfeld, 2007:6; Karraker and Grochowski, 2012).

Many social conditions prevent us from being analytical about families. Not only are families familiar and commonplace, they are also mystified. Mystification is the

deliberate misdefinition of family matters or "complicated stratagems to keep everyone in the dark" (Laing, 1971:77). This distorts family realities. As a result, we often misunderstand family processes in general and we even have misconceptions about our own families. Objectivity is thus obscured by two different qualities—familiarity and mystification.

Other obstacles that handicap the goal of objectivity are sacredness and secrecy (Skolnick, 1987:58). Families have myths, secrets, and information-processing rules that determine the kinds of communication that goes on—what can be said and, more important, what cannot be said. Families filter information about the outside world and about their own rules of operation. "Secrets" occurring in the realm of interpersonal relationships can occur in any family, remain hidden for decades, and have unsettling, even destructive implications when they are revealed (Brown-Smith, 1998; Imber-Black, 2000).

The family is not merely a social institution; it is a sacred label with strong moral connotations. At the same time, it is the most private of all society's institutions. "Equating family life with the private sphere grants a great deal of autonomy from neighborhood gossips and government regulations" (Hansen, 2005:5). The saying that "a family's business is nobody's business but their [sic] own" is not merely a statement about the right to family privacy; it symbolizes "decency" and other qualities a culture holds dear (Newman and Grauerholz, 2002:16). It also reflects the cultural value of family sacredness. The norm of family privacy gives the family an elusive quality that exists alongside its familiarity. In contemporary Western society, the family is, to use Erving Goffman's (1959) term, a "backstage" area, where people are free to act in ways they would not in public. This accounts for the deceptive

Family evokes a warm, caring, and psychological nurturance.

quality of family relations. Much of the intimacy of family life remains hidden behind "frontstage" performances—behavior to maintain a proper appearance in front of others (Berardo, 1998; Goffman, 1959). Privacy results in "pluralistic ignorance": We have a backstage view of our own families, but we can judge others only in terms of their frontstage presentations. Often we have "inside" interpretations of other families' "outsides." However, the gap between public norms and private behavior can be wide.

The ideals that we hold about "the family" color not only how we experience family life but also how we speak of our experience. This is not unique to our society. Anthropologist Ray L. Birdwhistell (1980) has found that most societies exhibit a gap between family ideals and family realities—between what people *say* about their family behavior and the *real behavior* that takes place in families. This distinction between ideals and behavior, between "talk" and "action," is one of the central problems in the social sciences (Mills, [1940] 1963:467). As we study the family, we cannot ignore the tensions between the way families *are* and the way we *would like them to be*. According to historian John Gillis, "we all have two families, one that we live *with* and another we live *by*. We would like the two to be the same, but they are not" (Gillis, 1996:viii).

Many images surrounding the U.S. family limit our understanding of family life. They distort the real character of life within families. This chapter narrows the gap between family imagery and family reality. We examine the images, ideals, and myths that shape our perceptions of families and our expectations of what our lives should be inside our own families. Then we provide a sociological framework for looking behind the facades of family life. This framework sets the stage for the chapters that follow.

Images and Ideals

"Family" in U.S. society is a symbol, a visual image that speaks to us through the senses, including smells, tastes, textures, motions, and sounds from our own remembered experiences (Tufte and Meyerhoff, 1979:11), as well as through our dreams and longings about what family should be. For roughly 150 years before 1960, most Americans shared a common set of beliefs about family life. A family consisted of a husband, a wife, and their children. The father was the breadwinner while the mother supported her husband, raised their children, cared for the home, and set moral standards for the family. Family life was cheerful and contented. Marriage was "for better or for worse." Parents were responsible for their children's well-being and their success (Hamburg, 1993:60; Cherlin, 2009:78; Furstenberg, 2009). While these were merely ideals even in 1960, the images they evoke remain with us. They are found in public rhetoric—in the discourse of politicians, social commentators, and moral leaders; in the talk of everyday interactions, and in movies, television shows, and books (Pyke, 2000:241; Mintz, 2012).

Even in today's world, the *cultural ideal* of family remains unaltered by dramatic family transformations of the past few decades. The ideal is the presumably stable, two–biological parent, male-breadwinner, female-homemaker family of the 1950s (Demo, 2000:17). In addition to prescribing family structure, the family ideal contains notions about the appropriate values, norms, and beliefs that guide the way families relate to one another (Pyke, 2000:241). "Family" is a warm and happy realm: two heterosexually married adults and their children living together comfortably, and going about their lives in mutually satisfying and harmonious ways. "Family"

embodies love, caring, and physical and psychological nurturance in a self-sustaining, nuclear family form—set apart from the troubled world.

The family is quintessentially the private (and some feel the only contemporary private) opportunity for vulnerability, trust, intimacy, and commitment; for lasting pleasant and peaceful relations; and for fullness of being in the human realm. The family thus is located as the physical site for a vast (and repressed) range of human expressions, the valid arena (and again perhaps the only arena) in which quality of life is a concern. It is in the family that we find the opportunity for authentic personal life (Tufte and Meyerhoff, 1979:17–18).

At least three distinct images of the family have emerged: the family as haven, the family as fulfillment, and the family as encumbrance.

Family as Haven

This "family as haven" image of a refuge from an impersonal world characterizes the family as a place of intimacy, love, and trust in which individuals may *escape* the competition in modern society. Christopher Lasch (1977:8) named this image a "haven in a heartless world" and described it as a glorification of private life made necessary by the deprivations experienced in the public world. The image has two distinct themes: love and protection. The sentimentalized notion of the family as a refuge from the cruel world reached its fullest expression in the Victorian period (Millman, 1991:136). The family was idealized as a setting of warmth and tenderness (embodied by the mother) standing in opposition to the competitive and aggressive world of commerce (embodied by the father). The family's task was to protect against the outside world. As the nineteenth century passed, the ideal family became "a womblike inside" to be defended against a corrupting outside (Kenniston, 1977:11).

Family as Fulfillment

The protective image of the family has waned in recent years as the ideals of family fulfillment have taken shape. Today the family is more compensatory than protective. It supplies what is vitally needed but missing in other social arrangements. If work does not provide excitement and stimulation, individuals can turn to their family lives for personal fulfillment. The image of family life today is one of intimacy: spouses, lovers, and even children making us feel alive and invigorated. In short, the family brightens up a social landscape that might otherwise seem gray (Demos, 1979:57). Today's ideal of intensive parenting—large amounts of quality time spent interacting with children—is seen as both critical to children's development and intrinsically fulfilling for parents (Bianchi et al., 2006:126).

The image is still that of a haven, but now it is a haven of primary fulfillment and meaningful experience. The modern emphasis on "self-actualization" and never-ending change in adulthood places more value on being able to choose freely than on commitment. Today, we no longer speak of "true love" as a love we would die for, or die without. Rather, we talk of love that is "meaningful" or "alive" because it involves "honesty" and it stimulates us to discover ourselves and to change (Millman, 1991:140). Self-fulfillment, enjoyment, and rejuvenation—the essential qualities of modern family life—may be contrasted with an older morality of duty, responsibility, work, and self-denial. Duty has been replaced with the obligation to *enjoy* family life. The "fun" morality expressed currently by the advertising industry glorifies the family united in pursuit of common activities that are enjoyed by all.

Family as Encumbrance

Loading the family with compensatory needs has created still another image—this one negative. The anti-image of the family is new. For the first time in U.S. history, we blame the family for inhibiting our full human development. This view calls for *freedom from* domestic relationships. Some research has found that workers escape demanding and stressful family relations by spending more time in the workplace and less time at home (Hochschild, 1997).

This image also views family relations as inhibiting the quest for a full experience of self. In a culture in which the "restless self" must be kept unfettered, flexible, and ready to change, attachments must be broken when they no longer permit continual development (Millman, 1991:142–143).

Monogamous marriage can become boring and stultifying. After all, variety is the "spice of life." Responsibility for children can compound the problem. The needs and requirements of the young are so constant, so pressing, that they leave little space for adults who must attend to them. "Spice" and "space" are, in fact, the qualities for which we yearn. In this anti-image, the family severely limits our access to either one (Demos, 1979:58).

Images and Reality

These three images of family life are different faces of reality. In each image the family is the primary institution through which the goals of personal growth and self-fulfillment are achieved. The differences lie in the effects of family on the individual. In the first and second images the effects are beneficial; in the third they are adverse. What do these images omit, and what kinds of distortions do they foster? All three images separate the family from society, creating "a sense of inside out in which the family is not experienced in its own right but in relation to other circumstances and other pleasures" (Demos, 1979:58).

Although family imagery has undergone great changes in recent decades, family and society remain polarized. The family still represents a symbolic opposition to work and business. Relations inside the family are idealized as nurturing, whereas those outside the family—especially in business and work—are seen as just the opposite. Families symbolize relationships of affection and love that are based on cooperation rather than competition (Collier et al., 1982:34).

Popular images of relationships between husbands and wives and between parents and children are overwhelmingly positive, typically of biological mothers and fathers playing with children or a family sharing a holiday dinner or going on vacation. Where are the other images of family life, such as sibling rivalry, divorce, or other common family conflicts? (Ferguson, 2007:2)

Outside circumstances increasingly produce inner family conflicts. Social and economic conditions in the larger society make it difficult to attain the idealized family experience. For example, as women have joined the paid labor force in great numbers, husbands *and* most wives have jobs and families. As they pursue demanding careers or work at jobs with long hours, they may have little time or energy to devote to the family. For women, the difficulties of balancing work and family are widely recognized, and the image of "superwoman" has become a new cultural ideal. The superwoman who appears repeatedly in magazines and on television commercials meshes her multiple roles perfectly. If she has children, she is a supermother, able to work 40 hours a week, keep the house clean and neat, entertain, keep

physically fit by jogging and fitness classes, and have a meaningful relationship with the superfather, who is both productive and nurturing and who shares fully in the work of running the household. Such superparents have quality time with their children (Galinsky, 1986:20; Gittins, 2011). This upbeat image of the modern superfamily that "has it all" obscures the different and often contradictory requirements imposed by work systems and family systems.

Popular cultural images no longer describe family life, if indeed they ever did. Nevertheless, the general public clings to romanticized images of the family. Even though family images often contrast with most family forms and practices, we persist in thinking about the family as a peaceful harbor, a shelter in the storm. This vision of family life has amazing staying power even if the underpinnings that allowed it to exist have eroded (Casper and Bianchi, 2002:xvi; McGraw and Walker, 2004:174; Ferree, 2010). Sociologist Dorothy Smith calls the idealized family image the **Standard North American Family (SNAF)**, an ideological code that distorts family reality and glorifies the two-parent family model (Smith, 1993). The image of an insular group consisting of two parents and children is a class- and race-specific ideal, which ignores the reality of family life in many sectors of the population. Social and economic forces make the ideal inaccessible to all, yet the two-parent family is the universally expected family form (Baca Zinn, 1990; Hansen, 2005:4; Gerstel, 2011).

The symbolic families that shape our thinking are misleading when they become standards against which we measure ourselves. They become normative (in the sense of obligatory) and operate as models affecting a great range of action and response. Not only is the symbolic family the measuring rod that shapes public policy; it guides internal evaluations of our own success and failure as family members.

We live in an "information" society filled with images and messages. Much of the vast flood of imagery deals with family life and is aimed at families. The mass media entertains us with endless dramatizations of family normality and deviance. From scenes of domestic perfection exhibited on television by the Cleavers in "Leave it to Beaver," the Bradys in "The Brady Bunch", and the Huxtables in "The Cosby Show," we have been indoctrinated with images of a family life that never existed (Taylor, 1992:64). Certainly, we are past the days of the perfect mom and all-wise dad. Today's television families are infinitely more realistic. Television families now run the gamut from two-career families to two single mothers and their children to unmarried couples (both heterosexual and same-sex) who cohabit in the same house (Mintz, 2012). Although today's television shows reflect diverse family structures, the families we "live by" continue to shape our expectations. We *expect* families to be happy and harmonious, to soothe away the

The mythical monolithic model.

cares of life outside the home. Disappointments in the home then become a source of inadequacy when family life fails to measure up to the imagined harmony of other families (Lerner, 1982:141; Scanzoni, 2004). Stephanie Coontz, the author of *The Way We Never Were* (1992), a book about family images, myths, and half-truths, finds that guilt is a common reaction to the discord between images and reality:

> Even as children, my students and colleagues tell me, they felt guilty because their families did not act like those on television. Perhaps the second most common reaction is anger, a sense of betrayal or rage when you and your family cannot live as the myths suggest you should be able to. (Coontz, 1992:6)

To question the idea of the happy family is not to say that love and joy cannot also be found in family life. Rather, the idealized fantasy overlooks the tensions and ambivalence that are unavoidable in everyday life. Despite the problems resulting from the "family harmony" image, this model is presented to the public by science, art, and the mass media. Even more critical, the model is used by our legal and social experts and by the nation's policy makers. The result is that the family is an "impossibly overloaded, guilt creating institution" (Birdwhistell, 1980:466).

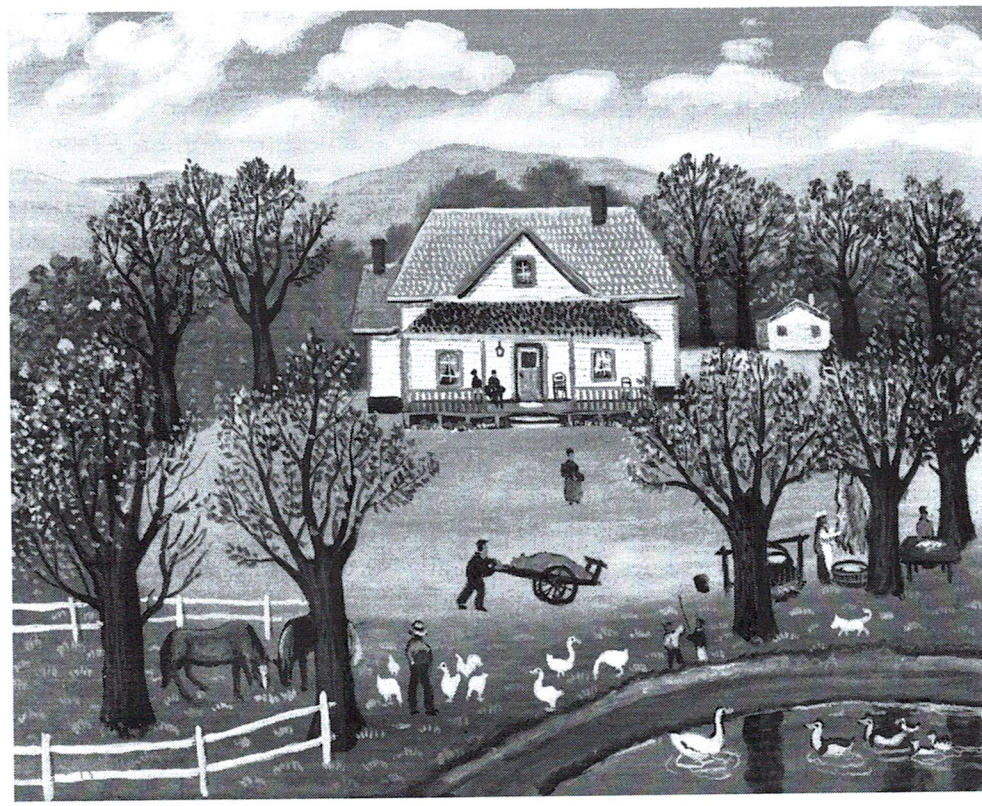
The Mythical U.S. Family

Family images are a composite of several closely related but distinct myths about the family. **Myths** are beliefs that are held uncritically and without examination or scrutiny (Crosby, 1985). These myths are bound up with nostalgic memory, selective perception, and cultural values concerning what is typical and true about the family. We will address the most prevailing myths that are popularly accepted as true in our society. In subsequent chapters we call into question the prevalent beliefs and folk wisdom that, if left unchallenged and unanswered, will become even more entrenched in the American mind as "the way families are." In this book, we use new knowledge as a "reply to myth" (Crosby, 1985): that is, as a way of challenging the commonly held myths about families in society.

The Myth of a Stable and Harmonious Family of the Past

Most people think that families of the past were better than families of the present. In our collective imagination, families in past times were more stable, better adjusted, and happier. There are two reasons for this flawed belief. First, we tend to be selective about what we remember. In other words, we romanticize the past. Second, extraordinary changes in family life *have* occurred over the past few decades.

A backward-looking approach makes it seem as if the families of the twenty-first century are in serious trouble. However, public anxiety about families is not new. In fact, the idea that the family is in trouble is as old as the nation itself. The earliest New England settlers feared that children were loosing respect for authority and that this endangered the family. Families of the past families are presented to us as more stable and more authentic than today's families. They are portrayed as simpler and less problematic. We imagine them as large, better integrated, untroubled by generational divisions, close to kin, and respectful of the old (Gillis, 1996:3). On closer examination, this glorified family is a historical fiction that never existed (Coontz, 1999a). Such nostalgic images of "traditional" families mask the inevitable dilemmas that accompany family life.



Contemporary families cannot measure up to romantic notions about family values.

Two points must be made about the stubborn myth of a vanished family past. First, family historians have found that there has never been a golden age of the family. Families have never been perfect. Across time, historians have found contrasts between the families people *have* and the families they *want* (Gillis, 1996). Families have experienced outside pressures and internal family conflicts. There has always been desertion by spouses, illegitimate children, and certainly spouse and child abuse. Divorce rates were lower, but this does not mean that love was stronger in the past. Many women died earlier from pregnancy complications, which kept divorce rates lower and which meant that many children were raised by single parents or stepparents, just as now. Divorces were relatively uncommon also because of strong religious prohibitions and community norms against divorce. As a result, many "empty" marriages continued without love and happiness to bind them.

To judge marriage of the past as better than contemporary marriage is to ignore historical changes. We expect more of marriage than did our forebears, but this fact makes modern marriage neither better nor worse, only different. Our challenge is to avoid nostalgia for a mythic past and examine the real problems being faced by today's families (Mintz, 2004, 2012). Chapters 2 and 3 examine the new social history of the family, which provides a far different picture of the past.

The Myth of Separate Worlds

The notion that family is a place to escape from the outside world is "the myth of separate worlds" (Kanter, 1984). It makes a distinction between "public" and "private" realms with family as the "haven in a heartless world." Here, social relations are thought to be different from those in the world at large. This myth assumes that families are self-sufficient units relatively free from outside social pressures. Families that are not self-sufficient are judged inadequate.

The idea that family is set apart from the world at large developed during industrialization (Zaretsky, 1976). In response to new economic demands, families certainly changed as communities loosened their grip on family life (see Chapter 2); yet families remain deeply linked to economic and political structures.

The idea that families exist in opposition to the rest of the world is a false dichotomy with contradictory expectations. Although we want the family to protect us *from* society, we also expect families to prepare us *for* society. The myth of separate worlds is ambivalent. On the one hand, the family is considered a private world, protecting its members from the outside, especially from the trials of work. On the other hand, families are expected to adapt to the conditions of work, to socialize children to become competent workers, and to provide emotional support to workers to enhance their effectiveness. The myth of separate worlds ignores the many ways in which the family is linked to the outside world. Families shape themselves in response to the demands of jobs, careers, schools, and other social institutions.

In our family lives we feel family strains from conflicts posed by the relationship between family and outside demands, yet the *popular* conception of the family remains that of a special enclave, detached from the wider society. This split vision is rooted in certain social realities. Modern society does demarcate public and private spheres, with the family representing the quintessentially private arena. The vision of the family as a private reserve, however, does not prevent society from intruding on every aspect of family life. There are close and sometimes combustible connections between the internal life of families and the organization of paid work, state-organized welfare and legal systems, schools, and day care centers (Thorne, 1992:5). Family life is constantly squeezed by the demands of these and other institutions. This is why we must reject the assumption that the family is a "haven in a heartless world." It cannot function as a haven when outside forces encroach on it (Lasch, 1975).

The myth of separate worlds leads to the belief that the family survives or sinks by its own resources and fitness—a kind of **family Darwinism** that blames families for structural failure (Polakow, 1993:39). This myth ignores the harsh effect of economic conditions (e.g., poverty or near-poverty), unemployment and underemployment, and downward mobility or the threat of downward mobility. It ignores the social inequalities (due to racism, sexism, ageism, and homophobia) that distribute resources differently.

Although the family is under pressure to appear freestanding, all families are entangled with other social institutions—the workplace, the welfare system, and the schools. Agencies and people outside the family have taken over many functions that were once performed by the family. Children, for example, are raised not only by their parents but also by teachers, doctors, social workers, and television. A study of the family commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation more than three decades ago found that parents have less authority than those with whom they share the tasks of raising their children. Most parents deal with persons from outside agencies from a position of inferiority or helplessness. They must compete with "experts," who are armed with special credentials, who are entrenched in their professions, and who have far more power in their institutions than do the parents (Kenniston, 1977).

Just as societal changes have weakened parents' authority, so have other large-scale changes revealed flaws in treating family and society in opposition. Globalization and the changes it produces in the economy, the workplace, and the nation-state are among the most important forces shaping family life today (see Chapter 4). Global forces affect families in profound ways. For example, increasingly global job markets produce uncertainly for workers and their families as jobs are outsourced (Karraker, 2008:19). Globalization creates greater mobility in the search

for work (see Chapter 4). It increases nonstandard work schedules, and it makes for longer work hours for most workers. Political globalization undermines the ability of nation-states and their various governmental agencies to control their own economy, the very nature of their jobs, and the income needed for family maintenance. In this way, globalization threatens family control of its members (Edgar, 2004). It heightens the connections between families and the wider social context. Families, states, and markets are *interconnected sites* rather than separate spheres (Ferree, 2010:425).

The Myth of the Monolithic Family Form

We all know what the family is *supposed* to look like. It should resemble the 1950s Ozzie and Harriet form. This uniform image has been imprinted on our brains since childhood, through children's books, schools, radio, television, movies, and newspapers; through the lectures, if not the examples, of many of our parents; and through the speeches, if not the examples, of many of our politicians. Invariably, the image is of a White, middle-class, heterosexual father as breadwinner, mother as homemaker, and children at home living in a one-family house. This monolithic image of "the normal American family" is a stick against which all families are measured (Pyke, 2000:240). This model represents a small proportion of U.S. households. Less than 10 percent of households consist of married couples with children in which only the husband works. Dual-income families with children made up more than twice as many households. Even families with two incomes and no children outnumber the conventional family.

The mythical model of the typical U.S. family embodies three distinctive features: (1) the family is a nuclear unit; (2) it consists of mother, father, and their children; and (3) it exhibits a gendered division of labor. The first two features are closely related. The nuclear family is separate from society and independent from kin. It consists of a married couple and their children living in a home of their own. The third distinguishing feature of "the family" is its assumed sexual division of labor: "a breadwinner husband, freed for and identified with activities in a separate economic sphere, and a full-time wife and mother whose being is often equated with the family itself" (Thorne, 1992:7).

Although this family type now represents a small minority of U.S. families, major social and cultural forces continue to assume this singular form. In reality, "this is an age of increasing family diversity" (Marks, 2006:62). It now makes more sense to talk about "types of families" (Mabry et al., 2004:93). Contemporary family types represent a multitude of family formations including single-parent households, stepparent families, extended multigenerational households, gay and straight cohabiting couples, child-free couples, transnational families, multiracial families, lone householders with ties to various families, and many other kinds of families (see Box 1.1). The tension between this diverse array of family groupings and the idealized 1950s family creates disagreement about what makes up families. The question of what constitutes a family, where its boundaries are drawn, and who does or does not belong to it at any point in time triggers many more questions. In fact, there is no consensus among social agencies, professionals, and ordinary people on what currently constitutes a family (Aerts, 1993:7; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2004:449; Gittins, 2011).

One way of moving beyond the distortions in the monolithic model is to distinguish between families and households. **Family** refers to a set of social relationships, while **household** refers to residence or living arrangements (Jarrett and Burton, 1999; Rapp, 1982). To put it another way, a family is a kinship group, whereas a household is a residence group that carries out domestic functions (Holstein and Gubrium, 1999:31). One good example of the importance of distinguishing between family and household is the restructuring of family obligations and household

BOX 1.1 Emergent Family Trends

Families of the Future

In the latter part of the twentieth century, social and demographic changes have altered the family more dramatically than in any comparable span of time in our history (Furstenberg, 2011:192). How will the family change in the twenty-first century? What will families look like? Recent trends suggest increasing complexity of family life in the United States. Sociologist Webb J. Farrell (2005: 101) suggests the following about families of the near future:

- At least one-half of all children will spend at least one-quarter of their lives in female-headed households.
- The new families will experience severely limited economic growth and growth opportunities.
- The new families will be characterized by a semi-extended family form made up of fictive kin with some ties to the family members' original homelands.
- The new families will more than likely live in households that have two primary languages for at least two generations.
- The new families will involve a recognition of sexually variant relatives and/or parents.
- The new families will consist primarily of people of color.

composition after divorce (Ferree, 1991:107). Family members do not always live in the same households. When separation and divorce break the bonds between mother and father, bonds between children and parents can remain intact. Another example is the migration of family members from one part of the world to another. In **transnational families**, family members are spread across national boundaries with a pattern of moving back and forth between countries. In today's world, more and more families extend across two or more households, generations, marital and legal statuses, blood ties, and even continents! People may live apart and still be in the same family. Therefore, household and family may overlap, but they are not the same thing. People may share a household and not consider themselves a family, and people may feel like a family while not living together (Bridenthal, 1981:48). (See Figure 1.1 on changes in households between 1970 and 2005.)

Although family relations and household arrangements today are more varied than at any time in history, diversity is not new. Throughout history, major social forces have created a wide range of family configurations. Today, the changes most responsible for the proliferation of family types are: (1) global forces causing families and their members to cross geographic, social, and cultural borders in search of employment; (2) women's unprecedented participation in the labor force; (3) new patterns in marriage and divorce; and (4) a decline in the number of children women bear. These developments have added to the emergence of new family types.

Perhaps the most striking change in the national profile of families is the rise in mother-only households and the poverty that often accompanies them. The vast majority of single-parent households are maintained by mothers. Patterns of gender inequality in the larger society contribute to "the feminization of poverty," the growing impoverishment of women (and their children) in U.S. society. Many children will not experience the idealized two-parent household during major portions of their childhood years. Less than 50 percent of children in the United States live in "traditional nuclear families" that have two biological parents married to each other, full-blown siblings only, and no other household members (Demo et al., 2005).

A growing trend toward the maintenance of households by persons living alone or with others to whom they are not related has also contributed to a greater variety of living arrangements. Factors contributing to the surge of nonfamily households include the increased tendency of young adults to move away from home at an early age, postponement of marriage, the continued high rate of divorce, and increasing numbers of elderly persons living alone.

Economic forces are creating other changes as well. For example, many households composed of two generations as adult children, face low-paying jobs, high college and/or credit-card debts, resulting in the children moving back in with their parents. Twenty-nine percent of young adults between the ages of 15 and 34 have moved back in temporarily with their parents (Mintz, 2012). (See Box 1.2.)

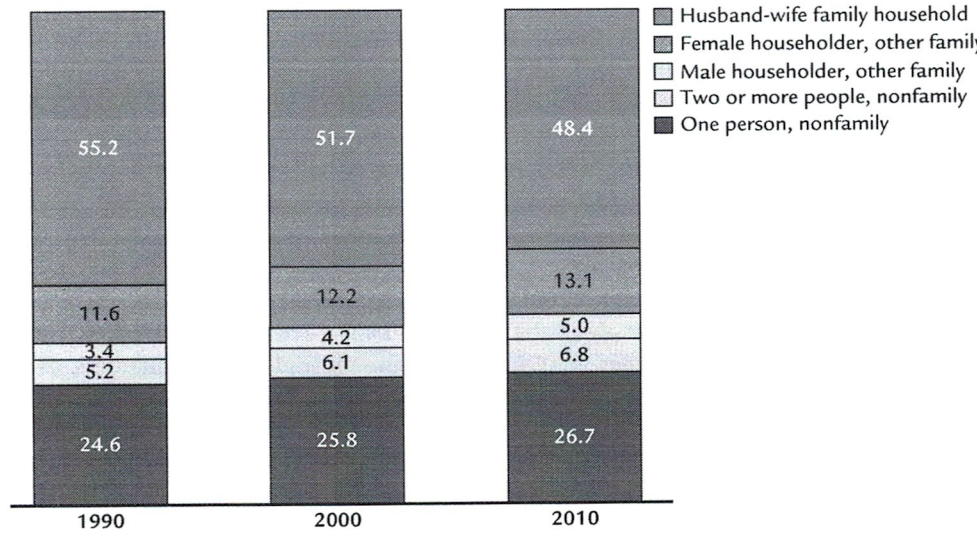


Figure 1.1

Households by Type: 1990, 2000, and 2010

Source: Lofquist, Daphne, Terry Lugaila, Martin O'Connell, and Sara Feliz, U.S. Census Bureau, 2012, *Households and Families: 2010*, 2010 Census Briefs. U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 2012, p. 16.

Demographic shifts in the racial and ethnic balance of the population are also transforming U.S. family patterns. At the beginning of the twentieth century, fewer than one in five Americans belonged to a racial or an ethnic minority. Today, racial ethnics make up one-fourth of the U.S. population. They will account for one-third of the population in the year 2030. Some of the most significant differences between various minority groups and dominant groups involve variations in family and household structure (Schwede et al., 2005). As the United States grows ever more diverse in racial and ethnic composition, family diversity will remain evident.

BOX 1.2 Think About This

Moving Back With Mom and Dad

The economic downturn that began in 2007 will affect families for some time to come. Economic conditions have produced an increase of young, primarily, middle-class adults returning to live with their parents after being away to college or having lived independently.

Among people aged 18 to 24, almost two-thirds of men (60 percent) and half of women live with their parents (U.S. Census Bureau). "These boomeranged adults are a generation facing an historic transformation in route to a successful job and family life" (Mintz, 2012). In the 1950s and 1960s, the pattern was to finish school and then leave the family of origin. Leaving the childhood home was an important and inevitable rite of passage for young adults. Owning a house and starting a nuclear family was their dream. "Failure to launch" was a social disgrace. Today's economic conditions have changed patterns of how and when people form families. Moving back home for financial reasons often comes before living independently or marrying. This sequence is no longer a stigma.

Is this trend a good thing or a bad thing? Will young people unused to struggle return to the immature dependence of childhood with free food and laundry service? Or, will moving back in with mom and dad provide a gradual transition to successful adulthood in today's economy? Some family experts say that pulling in a household to survive may make young adults more responsible—like the frugal and self-reliant Depression era generation. What do you think?

One type of family—made up of U.S.-born Whites—is becoming less dominant, and the future characteristics of the family will increasingly be influenced by what immigrant and minority families look like and do (Lichter and Qian, 2004:2; Marks, 2006) (see Chapter 4). Race and class are important structural factors underlying the diversity of family forms.

Research confirms that the United States has never had one distinct family form. What emerges when we refer to the U.S. family is a vast array of possible *families* (Elliott and Umberson, 2004:34). This has led some social scientists to conclude that "the American family" does not exist:

> The first thing to remember about the American family is that it doesn't exist. Families exist. All kinds of families in all kinds of economic and marital situations, as all of us can see. . . . The American family? Just which American family did you have in mind? Black or white, large or small, wealthy or poor, or somewhere in between? Did you mean a father-headed, mother-headed, or childless family? First or second time around? Happy or miserable? Your family or mine? (Howe, 1972:11)

The Myth of a Unified Family Experience

Partly because we glorify the family, we assume that family members experience the family in the same way—that family and individuals are merged and that they have common needs, common experiences, and common meanings. This conception of "the family" as a unified group is a "glued together family" (Sen, 1983, cited in Ferree, 1991), treated as if it were a single unit with a single set of interests.

New research challenges romantic assumptions about family and household unity, showing that women, men, and children experience their families in different ways. The best way to understand "within-family difference" is to "decompose" the family—that is, to break it down into its essential components (Mitchell, 1966). Two key components of all families are the gender system and the age system. These two systems produce different realities for men and women as well as for children and adults. These systems shape every activity that has to do with daily family living, such as the division of household labor, leisure activities, the giving and receiving of nurturance and emotional support, decisions about consumption, and employment. In addition, age and gender often produce different and conflicting interests among family members. This means that mothers, fathers, and children experience family life from different vantage points (Hertz and Marshall, 2001:2) (See Box 1.3.)

Jessie Bernard's classic work on marriage revealed that every marital union actually contains two marriages—his and hers—and that the two do not always coincide (Bernard, 1971). Researchers who ask husbands and wives identical questions about their marriages often get quite different replies, even to fairly simple, factual questions. The family as a **gendered institution** (Acker, 1992) is one of the most important themes in family research. There are gender differences in every aspect of family living, including decision making, household division of labor, and forms of intimacy and sexuality. Similarly, divorce affects female and male family members differently. Girls and boys experience their childhoods differently as there are different expectations, different rules, and different punishments according to gender. **Patriarchy** is the term used to refer to social relations in which men are dominant over women. Patriarchy in the larger society gives shape to a family system in which men are accorded more prestige and more privileges and in which they wield greater power.

Knowing that family experiences vary by gender, we can better understand the problems associated with the image of the family as a harbor from life's storms.

The family is idealized as a personal retreat, yet for most women it is a workplace, a place of domestic labor and child care. For whom, then, is the home a refuge—a nurturant haven? Barrie Thorne has provided the following answer:

> For the vast majority of women, the home is a place of considerable work, even when they are employed full-time out of the home. Researchers have found that women work in and out of the home an average of fifteen hours more than men each week, which adds up to an extra month of twenty-four-hour days a year. (Thorne, 1992:18)

Caring for families and caring about them is strongly gendered. Carework is considered women's work and is undervalued. Adult women are providers of care but less likely to be recipients of such care. Far more than men, women are the caretakers and the caregivers that maintain family bonds (Aldous, 1991:661; Rivas, 2011:183). A full understanding of family life requires that we attend to different experiences, different voices, and multiple family realities.

The Myth of Family Consensus

The idealized picture of family life is flawed in still another way. It assumes that families are based on "companionate" or "consensual" relations—in other words, on a harmony of interest among family members. This myth neglects a fundamental family paradox. Family life can be contentious due to the following conditions: (1) power relations within the family; (2) competitive aspects of family relations; (3) new patterns of work and leisure, which lead to different activities for family members; and (4) the intense emotional quality of family life.

In the fast-changing global economy, individuals depend on love and marriage to meet their interpersonal needs. Today's married partners expect more intimacy and support from each other than from anyone else. This puts great strains on marriage. And families seeking closeness between parents and children are also under strain when expectations of love are not met (Coontz, 2010; Coleman, 2010). The reality is that people do not always find nurturance and support in their families. Like workplaces and other social arenas, families are themselves sites of negotiation, exchange, power, conflict, and inequality (Cohen and MacCartney,

BOX 1.3 Technology and the Family

Family Connections in the Digital Age

Technological innovations have dramatic effects on today's families. Parents and children live in a screen-saturated society dominated by electronic devices that transmit information. The average American now spends more than 8 hours in front of screens perched side by side. According to the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project, 88 percent of adults now own a cell phone and nearly half of these are smart phones. Fifty seven percent own a laptop computer, 55 percent a desk-top model, 44 percent a game console, 19 percent an e-book reader, and 19 percent a tablet computer. Among young people aged 12 to 17, nearly 80 percent own a cell phone, and 30 percent have a smart phone (Kahn, 2012).

What effect does expanding screen use have on family connections? Does it decrease the time family members spend interacting with one another? Research conducted in 2010 by the Annenberg Center for the Digital Future found that "over the last decade the amount of time family members in Internet-connected households spend in shared interaction dropped from an average of 26 hours per week to less than 18 hours" (Kahn, 2012:A6). In staying connected and constantly monitoring work messages, social media sites, and texts, family members are be becoming *disconnected* from one another. In her latest book, *Alone Together* (2011), social scientist Sherry Turkel argues that technology is a substitute for human relationships.

Computers, TVs, cellphones, and other screen technologies have complex effects on relationships between parents and their children. For example, technology makes it possible for parents to be closely connected to their adolescent children—a text or call away. But Turkel finds that these connections introduce new complications as they *restrain* adolescent independence when teens need to become separate. Several boys in her study refer to the mistake of having taught their parents how to text and send instant messages (IMs). As one puts it: "I taught my parents to IM. They didn't know how. It was the stupidest thing I could do. Now my parents IM me all the time. It is really annoying. My parents are upsetting me. I feel trapped and less independent" (Turkel, 2011:174).

"My family likes to set up our grudges at Thanksgiving, stew over them through December, then take our revenge at Christmas."

2004:186). Behind closed doors, the other face of the family may be the opposite of the myth. In marriage, for example, the political reality of husband–wife relationships is evident in household division of labor, in family decision making, and "in extreme form in incidents of wife abuse" (Thorne, 1982:13). Parents' disproportionate power over their offspring produces family strains at all social levels.

Recognizing the political underpinnings of family life does not discount the solidarity and support found within the family realm. Families are sites of deep contradictions. Disagreement, competition, and conflict can coexist with order, stability, and cooperation (Mabry et al., 2004:95). Love and conflict often become entangled, creating an "arena of struggle" between family members (Hartmann, 1981).

Although we commonly romanticize the family as a place where all is shared and where nobody measures, research reveals that money matters are a common source of family strife (Funderberg, 2003). Families can display the same hard traits of the market. Money is used, often unconsciously, to control children, punish estranged spouses, measure a parent's true feelings for us, buy freedom from relationships, or stop a partner from leaving. And in the family as in the workplace, there is a system of exchange with accounting and punishment for not performing as expected. But because of our image of the family as a place of love and sharing, we underestimate common conflicts and rivalries (Millman, 1991:9).

The emotional quality of family life can produce deep ambivalence because emotional relationships inevitably contain negative as well as positive feelings. This

combination of love and antagonism sets intimate relationships apart from less intimate ones. Therefore, ambiguity is an integral part of family experience.

Because intimate relationships are intense, they can create a cauldron-like setting, one that is "overheated by its seclusiveness, specialization, and uniqueness" (Tufte and Meyerhoff, 1979:17). The family may then become less a refuge and more like a prison from which growing numbers of "refugees" (runaway children, permanently defecting adolescents, wives, and husbands) seek escape. Closeness, privacy, and intimacy can also create disorder and distance among family members.

Families may provide emotional support and nurturance for their members, but they may also inspire violence and brutality. Many family specialists argue that it would be hard to find a group or institution in U.S. society in which violence is more of an everyday occurrence than within the family. For example, most murder cases involve relatives or people involved in some intimate way. Violence is not found in all families, but there is an emotional dynamic to family life that can generate violence (see Chapter 11). We must acknowledge this fact if we are to understand the complexity of families in our society.

Family life is fraught with disparities. Families may provide emotional support for some family members but not for others. Or the support derived from the family may vary by age and gender. Some family members may derive support at great cost to others in the family. In addition, new patterns of work and leisure mean that family members are developing interests and activities that are different from other members of their families. In many cases, this leads to conflicting interests and expectations rather than convergence and mutual support. As a result, the companionship function of families comes under increasing stress (Coates, 2003:197).

Families are paradoxical. They may provide support for their members, but that support is neither uniform nor always present. Lillian Rubin has captured well the duality of family experience: "The family as an institution is both oppressive and protective and, depending on the issue, is experienced sometimes one way, sometimes the other—often in some mix of the two by most people who live in families" (Rubin, 1976:6).

The Myth of Family Decline as the Cause of Social Problems

Partly because of the myths about the past, and partly because the family has changed so much in the last few decades, many social analysts conclude that the "breakdown of the family" is responsible for many societal ills.

> Each day, the media serve up new stories and statistics documenting that marriage is going the way of the horse and buggy, that we are becoming a nation without fathers and that, as a result, children are suffering and society is falling apart. The breakdown of the family is taken for granted as a simple social fact. The only question is who or what is to blame and how can we restore the family to the way we imagine it used to be. (Mason et al., 1998:1)

In recent years, the definition of the family has been the focus of public debates. At the end of the twentieth century, rhetoric about the eroding *traditional family* became broadly accepted as a way of explaining such social ills as poverty, crime, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and gang violence. In the early 1990s, former Vice President Dan Quayle added to the national anxiety by denouncing television character Murphy Brown for having a baby without a husband. Declaring that unwed motherhood was destroying the nation, Quayle blamed the 1992 Los Angeles riots on family

decline. Although such hysteria has subsided, ideas about family decline and social problems persist (Mintz, 2004).

Welfare reform enacted in 1966 included the goal of promoting the two-parent family. The Personal Responsibility and Welfare Reform Act declared in its preamble that the married, two-parent family is the foundation of a successful society (Scanzoni, 2004:10). According to this logic, the two-parent family is the basis of social order. This family form is extolled as the one in which children are best socialized to become good citizens and in which women and men perform the roles essential to society. Any change in family structure is viewed as moral decline—that is, a loss of "family values." The debate about declining family values is really about a decline in a particular family *structure* (Dill et al., 1993).

Much of the current public debate about social problems and family decline centers on legalizing gay marriage (see Chapter 9). Even as public acceptance grows and state after state approves same-sex marriage, this debate remains contentious with opponents defending a narrow definition of family. At issue here is not family structure as in the debate about single parents, but family *composition.* Opponents argue that marriage should be restricted to heterosexual couples. They argue that same-sex marriage violates the definition of marriage, is harmful to children, and is harmful to society. As a result, legalizing gay marriage destroys the family and threatens social order. Like the national debates of the last century, this unfolding dispute highlights "the way in which a society defines family and the implications of that definition for membership in families" (Bolte, 2006:175).

The family-decline refrain is a way of distinguishing the two-parent heterosexual family from today's family and household options such as (a) more single women having children without a male partner, (b) more people living together without being married, (c) more unmarried couples raising children, (d) more gay and lesbian couples raising children. These practices are denounced as selfish practices that threaten the fabric of society. Put very generally, the family-decline position is that "as a result of hedonistic individualism, we are letting our 'family values' slip away and what is needed now is restoring the traditional family structure and composition. (Gerson, 2000; Mason et al., 1998:3).

What is wrong with the claim that family decline is the root cause of many social problems? This reasoning is flawed in two fundamental respects. First, it reverses the relationship between family and society by treating the family as the building block of society rather than *a product of social conditions.* The notion that changing families threaten society is a form of social reductionism. In this simple model of society, the family is the basic unit, the bedrock of society that "causes political and economic institutions to work or not to work" (Young, 1994:89). In reality, families are *situated within the larger political and economic conditions.* Family units are not responsible for social order (or disorder) in the larger society. Second, it ignores the structural reasons for family breakdown. Those who persist in seeing the current shifts in family life as the source of disarray have it backward (Stacey, 1994). Divorce and single parenthood are the *consequences* of social and economic dislocations rather than the cause, as some would have us believe. Poverty, financial insecurity, and high levels of interpersonal conflict are the biggest threat to family well-being (Gerson, 2000). The moral-decline approach is blind to the realities of rising inequality, concentrated poverty, and escalating government policies of social abandonment. It reverses cause and effect, thus making family transformation and growing family diversity convenient scapegoat (see Chapter 14). The simple solution that we return to the nuclear family at all costs allows the public and the government to escape social responsibilities, such as creating millions of jobs that we need, and building new houses and schools,

and creating millions of jobs that we need. This view moves the focus from the larger society to individual family members, who must then devise their own solutions for the social, economic, and technological shifts of our times.

Attempts to reassert the "traditional family" are strong. However, proponents of the two-parent family overstate the evidence that non-traditional families and households produce lasting damage to children and that children are always better off in two-parent families. Not all social scientists agree that family structure and composition are all that matter. Most researchers take a shades-of-gray position on family structure. The evidence does show that children in divorced, remarried, or unmarried families are at greater risk for a number of problems, but there is little support for the frightening picture painted by many (Skolnick, 1997b:16). Social researchers disagree about the benefits of the two-parent structure over other family types for child well-being. Still, important research holds that divorce and other family changes are not disastrous for children, but should be viewed as family challenges that most children adapt to over time (Elliott and Umberson, 2004:46–47). In fact, the vast majority of children in single-parent families turn out reasonably well. Alan Acock and David Demo, who examined a nationally representative sample of children and adolescents in four family structures, reported few statistically significant differences across family types on measures of socioemotional adjustment and well-being (Acock and Demo, 1994). They found few statistically significant differences in children's well-being in first-married, divorced, remarried, and continuously single-parent families (Demo, 2000:18).

Much of the national discussion about the harmful social and cultural effects of family breakdown is a thinly veiled attack on single mothers. Undeniably, many female-headed families are beset with a disproportionate share of family problems. But neither family structure nor family composition lock people in a cycle of poverty. Upholding the two-parent family as superior to all other family forms is a way of scapegoating individuals who are adapting to society's changes. Shifts in family life cannot be reduced to moral values.

Healthy families need healthy environments. Many neighborhoods have substandard services such as schools, health care, recreation facilities, sanitation, and police and fire protection. Due to massive economic transformations and various kinds of social disinvestment in the public good, the middle class and the poor, families across the country are threatened. This is the real enemy of strong families. Of course, the transformations in family structure and family composition are vital. But we should also ask hard questions about *family process,* that is the patterns of interaction among family members. We should be concerned not with how well they conform to a particular image of the family but, rather, how well they function—what kind of loving, care, and nurturance do they provide?" (Mason et al., 1998:2; Cowan and Cowan, 2010).

A New Framework for Understanding Families

The Sociological Perspective

We have seen that the conventional wisdom about the family is often wrong. Popular ideas about family life are often "reductionist" in that they focus almost exclusively on individuals as they perform their family roles (Sprey, 2001:4). This book is different. It is firmly grounded in the sociological perspective for a critical understanding of the nation's diverse and changing families. Our central task is to examine how

families reflect changes in society. To understand the full range of families that exist today requires that we examine forces beyond individuals and outside the family. It requires a perspective that examines how families are changing in the context of broad political, economic, and technological shifts. A sociological perspective does this. What is a sociological perspective? How does it apply to family study? Sociology focuses on how families are related to other social institutions and structures. Because social structures are abstract and often invisible, we must look behind the facades of family life to see how families are organized in socially patterned ways.

Two sociological principles are used throughout this book. The first principle is that there is a close relationship between families and the larger society that shapes them. The second principle requires a critical examination of family and society that questions the existing myths, stereotypes, and official dogma. Let us look at these in turn.

In studying family life we make a distinction between two levels of analysis. The **macro level** examines the family in relation to the rest of society. Instead of focusing on family roles and relations in isolation from the rest of social life, families are analyzed in reference to societal trends. The macro level of analysis illustrates how larger social systems shape the smaller family systems. For example, we call on macrostructural change to explain why families are far different from what they used to be. A macro level of analysis also looks at how the family as an institution contributes to the organization of the larger society (Kain, 1990:15). For example, the family is a vital part of the economy because it produces both workers and consumers. The family is a primary mechanism for perpetuating social inequality through the interlocking systems of race, class, and gender. This enables us to see how "society makes families and families make society" (Glaser, cited in Billingsley, 1992:78).

The societal level is not the only focus of our inquiry. We also emphasize the interior life of families. The **micro level** of analysis examines the internal dynamics of family life. In this type of analysis, the family is a "small group in which individuals spend much of their lives" (Kain, 1990:15). In micro analysis we examine the varied "experiences of kinship, intimacy, and domestic sharing" (Thorne, 1992:12). This is where the vital interpersonal dramas of love and domination, of companionship and conflict, and of happiness and hatred occur. Of course, intimate family relationships reflect the hierarchies of the larger social world. Understanding families requires that we study both the macro level and the micro level and how each affects the other.

Because our emphasis is on social structure, the reader is required to accept the second fundamental assumption of the sociological perspective: the need to adopt a critical stance toward all social arrangements. We must ask these questions: How do current social and economic changes affect families and the individuals within them? How are large-scale social and economic changes experienced by families in different segments of the population? Who benefits under the existing social arrangements and who does not? These questions require that we look beyond the commonly accepted definitions of family and society.

The Paradigm Shift in Family Studies

The world today is in the midst of profound social changes in which people are taking apart and renegotiating "what used to be straightforwardly known as 'the family'" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2004:499). Just as families in the nation and the world are changing dramatically, so is the scholarship on families. As society experiences major "earthquakes," social science thinking about families is undergoing "seismic shifts." Today, new ideas about diversity and social context are sweeping the family field and making it more exciting than ever before (Allen and Demo, 1995; Bengston

et al., 2005; Cheal, 1991; Coleman and Ganog, 2004; Mann et al., 1997; Scott et al., 2004; Demo, 2010).

These new developments have fundamentally changed our knowledge about the way families operate, producing what is called a paradigm shift. **Paradigm** refers to the basic assumptions that scholars have of the social worlds they study. A family paradigm includes basic conceptual frameworks—in other words, models of families in society, and the field's important problems, questions, concepts, and methods of study.

The old family paradigm posited a standard and uniform process of family formation. This model was rooted in concerns that shaped the early social sciences—namely, the shift from traditional to modern society. Modernization was thought to produce a universal family type. In the 1950s and 1960s, the notion of one family form was an important feature of the era's paradigm known as structural functionalism. This theory views all social institutions as organized around the needs of society: The family was uniquely equipped to cope with the economic system. Dad was the instrumental leader of the family who managed the outside world and connected his family to the economic system. Mom was the expressive leader, who helped protect Dad from the pressures of the outside world and managed the home (Furstenberg, 2009). Talcott Parsons (1955), the major sociological theorist in the United States and the leading family theorist of the 1950s and 1960s, saw the family as a vital element in the larger social system because it provides a haven from the outside world. According to his theory, the modern nuclear family with a breadwinner husband and a homemaker wife and two or more children was the basis of moral order, social unity, and the smooth functioning of society. This family form, organized around a harmony of interests, was essential for the common good through the socialization of children and the orderly division of labor between women and men. Parsons called it "the normal family" (Parsons, 1965). Structural functionalism treated the modern nuclear family as the norm, even though there were many varieties of families in different regional, economic, racial, and ethnic groups (Baca Zinn, 2000:44).

Structural functionalism was flawed. It mistook a historically specific family form as the universal form for families in modern society (Mann et al., 1997:321). This distorted and misrepresented family life because it generalized about families from the experience of the dominant group.

In the past four decades, new thought and research have changed our thinking. A flood of new ideas and approaches has produced a shift away from uniformity and changed the field forever. The shift in family sociology has been so pronounced that one scholar calls this stage of development a "Big Bang"—a dramatic period of diversification in family studies (Cheal, 1991:153). Not only are families and households becoming more diverse and fluid in the new century, but "diversity and fluidity are now *normal*" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2004; Bengston, 2001; Stacey, 1996).

The Structural Diversity Approach

The perspective used in this book draws on a conceptual framework that we call "structural diversity." This framework views all families in society as shaped through their interaction with social structures. The approach goes beyond adding different group experiences to already established frameworks of thought (Andersen and Collins, 2010). We explore the close connections between the inner workings of family life and the structural forces that shape *all* families, albeit in different ways. Our coverage of the nation's various family arrangements is not simply for cultural appreciation. We want our readers to understand *why* families are diverse. We provide a coherent analysis as well as a new approach. Our approach is based on the premise

that families are divided along structural lines that shape their form and functioning. The new perspective on families incorporates the following themes:

1. *Families are socially constructed and historically changing.* Although we think of families as "natural," there is no universal definition of the family. Social history shows that families vary by economic, political, and cultural conditions. Supporting this view are the social constructionist and social structural theoretical approaches. To say that families are socially constructed means that they develop in the context of social and economic realities. Different social and economic contexts define and organize families differently. What seems "natural" depends on time, place, and circumstance. How a family is defined depends on the historical period, the society, and even the social stratum within that society (Coltrane, 1998:1–9; Gittins, 2011). "Stages we take for granted like childhood, adolescence, and adulthood are not timeless entities built into human nature but aspects of the human condition that have been reshaped with historical changes" (Skolnick, 1993:45). The point is that the form and meaning of families, gender, motherhood, fatherhood, or childhood are socially and historically varied.
2. *Family diversity is produced by the same structures that organize society as a whole.* The institution of the family is connected to other social institutions including the economy, politics, education, and religion. Families are also tied to systems of inequality such as class, race, gender, and sexuality. Both social institutions and relations of inequality divide families along structural lines. They create different contexts for family living through their unequal distribution of social resources and opportunities. Different contexts or "social locations" are what cause differences. Instead of being an intrinsic property of groups that are culturally different, family variation is *structural.* The relationship between opportunity systems and families is central to family diversity. The uneven distribution of work, wages, and other family requirements produces different family forms and different family experiences (Baca Zinn, 2010). At any particular time, a society will contain a range of family types that vary with social class, race, region, and other structural conditions. Today, global forces also affect families; that is, "every family on earth is more or less touched by global economic and political realities" (Karraker, 2008:8).

   Family diversity can be based on "social relations between dominant and subordinate groups" (Weber, 2001:81). Not only do power relations determine the resources different groups have available for family life, but "there is a direct relationship between the privileged circumstances of some families and the disadvantaged position of other families" (Garey and Hansen, 1998:xvi). Family variation is *relational.* This means that the lives of different groups are linked even without face-to-face relations (Glenn, 2002:14). For example, the histories of racial-ethnic families in the United States were not a matter of simple coexistence with dominant race and class groups. Instead, the opportunities of some families rested on the disadvantages of other families (Dill, 1994). In the twenty-first century, global forces are producing new connections between different family forms in far-reaching parts of the world. The growing demand for paid domestic workers is part of an international division of labor in which women from developing nations leave their families to work for U.S. families and those of other post-industrial countries. The work they do enables women in privileged families to have professional careers even as the maids, nannies, and other caretakers are forced to accommodate their lives to the demands of their labor and live across the world from their own families (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Parrenas, 2001). This is one way in which globalization is producing new

forms of privilege and disadvantage that rest on distinctive family arrangements and on structurally connected "disparities between families in the third world and those in the first world" (Karraker, 2008:99) (see Chapter 13).

3. *Families are embedded in and shaped by intersecting systems of class, race, and gender.* These structures of inequality converge to place families in particular **social locations**. When we examine how families and individuals are positioned within these interlinked systems, we have a better grasp of different family arrangements and different family experiences. Locational differences in opportunity structures are crucial for the sociological study of families. Not only do race, class, and gender shape families in different ways, their intersections mean that people of the same race may experience family differently depending on their location in the class structure as unemployed, poor, working class, or professional; their location in the gender structure as male or female; and their location in the sexual orientation system as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Baca Zinn and Dill, 1996:327).

4. *Family diversity is constructed through social structure as well as the actions of family members.* The structural diversity model stresses larger social forces in shaping families differently. Although society and its structures are powerful, human beings are not simply the product of structural forces. Even in social locations characterized by limited resources, family members can find ways of adapting and thriving.

   A structural analysis must not lose sight of the human beings who shape their families through their own actions and behaviors. Families, after all, are not just molded from the "outside in." What happens on a daily basis in domestic settings also constructs families. Women, men, and children are not passive. They actively shape their families by adapting to, and changing, certain aspects of their social environments. This process is called **human agency**. People often use their families in order to cope, survive, and even challenge social institutions that impinge on them. Their ingenuity and agency may result in new family arrangements. In other cases, family inventions are guided by choice as much as survival. Behaviors that family members use in adapting to structural constraints and stressful events are called "family adaptive strategies." Although strategies are constrained by structural conditions, people can resist, challenge, and shape social structures to meet their family needs.

5. *Understanding families means challenging monolithic ideas that conceive of the family in idealistic ways.* This differs from past approaches, which were based on studies involving mostly White, middle-class families. This practice distorted the reality of lives within most families, given that the United States has always had a significant portion of families of color and far too many families in poor or working classes (McGraw and Walker, 2004:176). Today, the family field takes various standpoints into account. Several bodies of new scholarship by and about marginalized groups are documenting multiple family realities. Feminists representing different schools of thought along with various racial and ethnic groups, members of the working class, and lesbians and gays have pressed for a redefinition of "the family." New scholarship about families as they vary by class, race, gender, and sexuality offers powerful alternatives to the old paradigm. The structural diversity model draws from many scholarly fields including history, economics, anthropology, and psychology as well as the new fields of women's studies, African American studies, Latino studies, and cultural studies. Their insights can enhance the sociological perspective and offer vital building blocks for understanding the wide variety of family types in the United States.

Additional Features of This Book

The framework described in this chapter is woven throughout this book. The demythologizing of families is a central theme. Each chapter begins with a list of myths juxtaposed by the facts that are presented in greater detail in that chapter. In addition, the chapters include five distinctive boxes to enhance your understanding of family life.

1. *Inside the Worlds of Diverse Families* looks inside microstructural worlds to put a human face on some of the rhythms, textures, and conflicts of everyday family life.
2. *Researching Families* presents the main approaches and methods sociologists use in their studies.
3. *Families in Global Perspective* offers an international view of families, with selected illustrations that have both global and domestic implications.
4. *Technology and the Family* explores the effects of new technologies on different features of family experience.
5. *Emergent Family Trends* provides a look at new family patterns and the meaning they have for future families.
6. *Think About This* encourages students to think critically about family issues especially pertinent to them.

We hope that you capture some of our enthusiasm for exploring the intricacies and mysteries of families in society.

Study and **Review**

Chapter Review

1. Families are in upheaval around the world. These changes are confusing to many observers. Although some see this upheaval as a sign of family decline, the real causes of family change lie in larger changes occurring in the nation and the world.
2. Our objectivity as sociologists and students is often obscured by our own experiences and by ideals and myths about the family.
3. Three distinct images of the family can be identified in U.S. society: (a) family as a haven, (b) family as fulfillment, and (c) family as encumbrance. All of these images place family and society in opposition to each other.
4. Six family myths underscore the disparities between idealized and real patterns of family life.
5. The myth of a stable and harmonious "traditional family" glorifies the past. We know now that problems considered unique in today's families also existed in the past.
6. The myth of separate worlds polarizes family and society. In fact, the family is embedded in social settings that affect the day-to-day realities of family life.
7. The myth of the monolithic family form assumes that all families are nuclear in structure; are composed of a father, mother, and children; and exhibit a sexual division of labor featuring a breadwinner father and a homemaking mother. This model accounts for only 7 percent of families in the United States. Because "family" is an idealized concept, sociologists often find it useful to use the concept of "household," which is a domestic unit.
8. The myth of a unified family experience assumes that all family members have common needs, interests, and experiences. Gender and age, however, create different experiences for women and men and adults and children.
9. The myth of family consensus assumes that families operate on principles of harmony and love. These ingredients are present in most families. Nevertheless, this myth ignores the contradictions that are intrinsic to family life due to power relations, financial concerns, different work and leisure patterns, and the intense emotional quality of family life.

10. The myth of family decline blames social problems on eroding moral values and families that differ from the idealized, but fictional traditional family. This myth ignores the social shifts that are changing families throughout the United States and the world.
11. This book uses a sociological perspective to analyze families. This analysis requires a critical examination of social relations.
12. Sociologists analyze families at two levels. The macro level examines families in relation to the larger society, and the micro level examines the interpersonal features of family life.
13. The sociological perspective stresses structural conditions that shape families differently, but it does not lose sight of individuals who create viable family lives.
14. In the past, family sociology treated diversity in families as special "cultural" cases. The paradigm known as structural functionalism viewed the nuclear family as the norm.
15. A new paradigm has emerged in the family field. The structural diversity approach treats diversity in families as the norm. The key to understanding family diversity is the structural distribution of social opportunities.

Key Terms

family 11
family Darwinism 10
gendered institution 14
household 11
human agency 23
macro level 20
micro level 20
myths 8
paradigm 21
patriarchy 14
social locations 23
Standard North American Family (SNAF) 7
transnational families 12

Related Websites

http://www.contemporaryfamilies.org

Council on Contemporary Families. The Council on Contemporary Families is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to providing the press and public with the latest research and best-practice findings about American families. Founded in 1996 and based at the university of Miami, the Council's mission is to enhance the national understanding of how and why contemporary families are changing, what needs and challenges they face, and how these needs can best be met. To fulfill that mission, the Council holds annual conferences that are open to the public and issues periodic briefing papers and fact sheets.

http://www.trinity.edu/~mkearl/family.html

Kearl's Guide to the Sociology of the Family. Published by Michael Kearl of the Sociology and Anthropology Department at Trinity University, this award-winning website offers extensive resources on a variety of family topics, including information on the cultural factors that shape family structures and processes, American relationship preferences, and singlehood and alternative family forms.

http://www.ncfr.org

National Council on Family Relations. NCFR is the oldest multidisciplinary, nonpartisan professional organization focused solely on family research, practice, and education. The council provides a 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. NCFR publishes three scholarly journals—*Journal of Marriage and Family, Family Relations,* and *Journal of Family Theory and Review*—as well as books, audio- and videotapes, and learning tools.

http://www.childstats.gov

Childstat.gov. This website is provided by the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (Forum), a working group of Federal agencies that collect, analyze, and report data on issues related to children and families. The Forum has partners from 22 federal agencies as well as partners in private research organizations. The site offers easy access to statistics and reports on children and families, including: family and social environment, economic circumstances, health care, physical environment and safety behavior, education, and health. The Forum fosters coordination, collaboration, and integration of federal efforts to collect and report data on conditions and trends for children and families.

Media Resources

View

- The Decline of Two-Parent Families
- Family Structure: U.S. Families With Children Under Age 18 Headed by Mothers, Fathers, and Both Parents

Read

- Coontz, Stephanie. *The Way We Weren't: The Myth and Reality of the "Traditional" Family.*