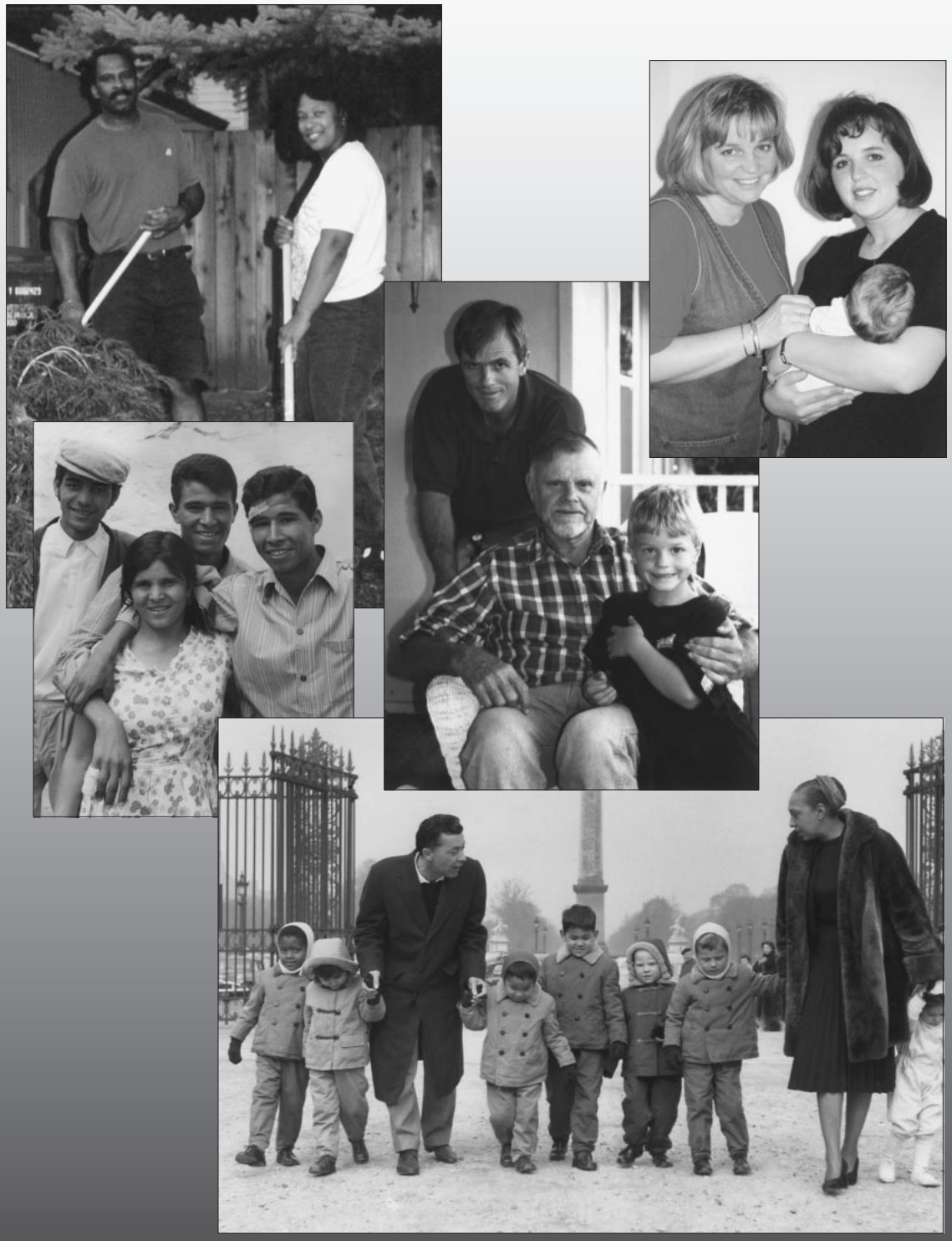
PART I

Private Experiences and Public Issues

Part I of this book examines several controversial issues that make up the social backdrop against which we experience our own families and form our opinions and beliefs about families in general. You will probe questions like, Which arrangements get to be called a family? How accurate are common images of families? Should families be completely private? How do we balance personal interests and needs with family obligations? How do gender, race, and ethnicity affect family life? What is the role of wealth or poverty in our family experiences? Is the institution of family breaking down? The information presented in response to these questions is designed to provoke personal reflection, critical thought, and impassioned discussion.



ISSUE 1

What Is a Family?

Definitions of Family

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The Symbolism of Family

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

On August 13, 1995, Mickey Mantle died. He was a Hall of Fame baseball player for the New York Yankees and idol of millions during the 1950s and 1960s. A network news show that evening ran a videotape of the beginning of the game played at Yankee Stadium earlier in the day. The public address announcer asked the crowd to observe a moment of silence in remembrance of Mickey. "Today is a sad day for the Yankee *family,*" he said, "because today we have lost one of our own, and one of the greatest players in the history of baseball."

In the film *Fried Green Tomatoes,* Evelyn Couch—a character played by actress Kathy Bates—becomes quite fond of an old woman named Ninny Threadgoode, whom she meets while visiting a nursing home. Ninny—played by the late Jessica Tandy—inspires Evelyn to take control of her own life. Evelyn decides she would like Ninny to live in her house with her and her husband, Ed. But Ed is unwilling to have a stranger live in their house, and he forcefully shouts, "She's not even *family*!" to which Evelyn quickly replies, "Well, she's *family* to me!"

In a video exhibit in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., one Holocaust survivor after another offers moving testimony of their experiences in German concentration camps during World War II. The survivors reminisce frequently and with great emotion about their *camp families*—those fellow inmates with whom they formed immensely important and powerful relationships in the face of what was surely perceived as certain death. Prior to imprisonment, the people who would become these survivors "parents," "children," "brothers," and "sisters" were complete strangers; many of them came from different countries and spoke different languages.

At the 1996 Democratic National Convention, Christopher Reeve, the actor confined to a wheelchair after a serious horse riding accident, made a speech to the delegates and to a national television audience:

> I know the last few years we have heard a lot about something called "family values." And like many of you, I have struggled to figure out what that means, and since my accident I have found a definition that seems to make sense. I think it means that we are all *family*. And that we all have value. Now if it's true, if America really is a family, then we have to recognize that many members of our family are hurting … and if you're really committed to this idea of family, we have got to do something about it. (quoted in Democratic National Committee, 1996)

What do these diverse examples have in common? They all illustrate the varied, fluid, and somewhat unexpected ways people use the term *family* and the powerful connotation this term has. In all of these examples, only the word *family* was forceful enough to describe the strength of people's feelings and sense of connection to others. As a symbolic marker of the depth of affection and obligation, the vocabulary of *family* is unparalleled in the English language. No other term would do. The message would have been much less powerful if, say, the Yankee Stadium announcer referred to the grief of *a close-knit organization*, or if Evelyn Couch had tried to make her point by saying, "Well, she's *a real companion* to me!" or if the concentration camp survivors referred to fellow inmates who saved their lives as *good friends*. Could Christopher Reeve have appealed to our collective sense of moral duty if he said we are all *fellow citizens* instead of *family*? Certainly not.

The curious thing, though, is that in none of these examples was *family* used to describe what most of us commonly think of as a family—people related to one another through blood, marriage, or adoption. Instead it was used to describe real and imagined relationships based on love, commitment, sacrifice, and obligation.

Herein lies one of the most provocative but deceptively simple questions facing people who study family: Just exactly what is a family? Who get to be called a family?

In Issue 1, we will begin to look at the various ways *family* is defined. Far from being an obscure issue of linguistic and philosophical debate argued in the hallowed halls of academia, the definition of family—which groups of people get to be called a family and, conversely, which are prohibited from claiming family status—has very real and very critical consequences for all of us. Social policies often reflect prevailing definitions of family (Walters, 1982). A unit defined as a family may be in line to receive such benefits as housing, health care, and sick leave, not to mention legitimate recognition within its community (Popenoe, 1993). Those who fall outside the definition, however, are not only ineligible for such benefits but their relationships may be treated by some as illegitimate, inappropriate, or immoral as well (Hartman, 1994).

At the societal level, our beliefs about what a family *is* determine our beliefs about what it *isn't*. Our ideas about which family forms are acceptable, normal, desirable, and praiseworthy, determine which are considered abnormal, problematic, and in need of fixing or condemnation.

Definitions of Family

It would seem that nothing is more obvious and commonplace than the concept of family. It's something that everyone can relate to. We're all born into a family of some sort or another and will spend at least part of our lives inside one. We're surrounded by influential images of family in books, on television, and in film. If someone asked you to spot the families strolling through a large shopping mall, I would wager that you would have no difficulty doing so.

Yet, as familiar and recognizable as it is, *family* is also a remarkably elusive term that defies agreement or consistent application. Coming up with a universal definition of the family that everyone everywhere would agree on is a little like trying to nail pudding to a wall.

A nationwide poll conducted by the Roper Organization indeed found wide variation in what people consider a family. Although 98 percent of the respondents identified a married couple living with their children as a family, 53 percent also identified an unmarried man and woman who've lived together for a long time as a family; 27 percent felt a lesbian couple raising children was a family; and 20 percent felt two gay men committed to each other and living together constituted a family (cited in Gelles, 1995).

It's often unclear exactly why some arrangements are considered family and others not. Several years ago, for instance, a Cleveland woman was convicted and sentenced to 5 days in jail for failing to comply with the city's local residential zoning laws. Her crime? She resided in a "nonfamily" household in a neighborhood zoned for "families." The ordinance defined family as "a number of individuals related to the nominal head of the household or to the spouse of the nominal head of the household living as a single housekeeping unit in a single dwelling" (Minow, 1993). The woman lived with her son and two grandsons, but since the two boys were first cousins rather than brothers, the arrangement was not considered a family.

Yet in 1990 the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled that a group of ten male college students living in a home in a residential

district in the borough of Glassboro could be considered a family. The borough had sought an injunction to prevent the students from using or occupying the home under a zoning ordinance that limited residence in this area to stable and permanent "traditional family units" or their "functional equivalent." The students shared the kitchen as well as household chores, grocery shopping, and yard work. They maintained a common checking account to pay for food and other household bills. They all intended to live there as long as they were enrolled at a nearby college (they were sophomores at the time). The court ruled that these facts reflected a plan by the students to live together for 3 years under conditions that met the requirement of a "stable and permanent living unit" (Thoresen, 1991).

Not only are some people excluded from accepted definitions of family, some family connections are privileged over others. Take adoption laws, for instance. Laws in some states keep adoption records sealed and refuse adoptees access to information about their birth parents. Such laws place biological parents' rights to privacy over adoptees' rights to information about and contact with biological relatives.

Changing Family Forms

One of the most common assessments we hear about current families is that they don't look or function like families of a few decades ago. ▲ Back then, families were assumed to be a married couple with two or more children, a husband who was the sole breadwinner, and a wife who stayed at home and cared for the house and the kids. But significant numbers of families didn't conform to this definition then, and today family forms are even more diverse: dual-earner families, single-parent families, remarried couples, unmarried couples, childless couples, stepfamilies, foster families, extended or multigenerational families, and so on (Ahlburg & De Vita, 1992). These changes undoubtedly affect our definition of families and our expectations of what goes on inside them. With so much flux and variation in family living, is it possible or even desirable to come up with a single definition of *family*?

▲ *Issue 2 explains why our images of families of the past are often misleading. Comparing current family forms to these images can lead to inaccurate conclusions.*

The "Official" Definition of Family

In the United States, the official definition of *family* comes from the U.S. Census Bureau. This agency distinguishes between *household* and *family*. Households are defined as all persons who occupy a dwelling such as a house, apartment, single room, or other space intended to be living quarters. They can consist of one person who lives alone or several people living together. A family, on the other hand, is defined as two or more persons who are related by blood, marriage, or adoption, and who live together as one household (Ahlburg & De Vita, 1992).

Right away you can see that this definition limits official conceptions of family primarily to what social scientists call the nuclear family—the small unit consisting of a married couple or at least one parent and one child. Although most of us would also consider many other relatives—grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins—to be family as well, the nuclear family has received more cultural, political, and scholarly attention than the extended family.

How useful is this official definition of family? Does it describe all American families? Can it be applied universally in all societies? And what do its component parts imply about the nature of people's relationships and responsibilities within families? To ad-

dress these questions, let's break down the official definition of *family* and examine its component parts.

"Two or More People": Family as Social Group. Sociologically speaking, families contain not only individuals but relationships: husband-wife, parent-child, brother-sister, and so on. These relationships imply connections, bonds, attachments, and obligations *between people,* and they combine to form a type of social group. But the groups we call families are different from other types of social groups, such as friendship groups, social clubs, church groups, and so on (Beutler, Burr, Bahr, & Herrin, 1989). For one thing, the intensity of involvement between family members is stronger than it is in other groups. The range of activities we share with family members is much broader than contacts with friends, co-workers, or other people in groups to which we belong. We do pretty much everything with fellow family members: eating, sleeping, playing, punishing, fighting, convalescing from illness, having sex, and so on. Such close involvement adds a unique emotional element to family relationships.

Another big difference is that families last for a considerably longer period of time than do most other social groups (Klein & White, 1996). We're born into a family that already exists and it endures for our lifetime. Even after we become adults and start our own families, our parents are still our parents and our siblings are still our siblings no matter what we think of them. During the 1997 NCAA Men's Basketball Championships, a great deal of media attention was focused on the strained relationship between Mike Bibby, a star player for the University of Arizona Wildcats, and his estranged father, the former NBA player and current University of Southern California coach, Henry Bibby. Henry had divorced Mike's mother when Mike was quite young and played only a minor role in his upbringing. Mike clearly bore some animosity toward his father and wanted to downplay the influence he had on his life. But he could not escape the immutable fact that Henry is, and will always be, his father. We can certainly have lifelong relationships with close friends, but families are the only groups that virtually require lifetime membership.

The strong prospect for future interaction gives families a history and tradition rarely found in other groups. Relationships between parents and their children, whether biological or adopted, are not easily severed. Given how common divorce is now—nearly one of every two marriages that begins this year will end in divorce sometime in the future (Cherlin, 1992)—this idea of permanence applied to families may seem hopelessly outdated. ▲ However, we still assume that the people involved don't enter these relationships as temporary arrangements with a foreseeable end.

▲ *As Chapter 7 explains, divorce does not end children's relationships with parents and other relatives, although it may complicate them.*

More than most other social groups, the family is also considered a social institution within the larger society. To be a member of a family group means more than simply being connected to other individuals. It also means having certain legal and culturally recognizable rights and responsibilities, which are spelled out in the formal laws of the state and the informal norms of custom and tradition. Parents, for instance, have legal obligations to provide basic necessities—food, shelter, clothing, nurturance—for their children. If they fail to meet these obligations they may face legal charges of negligence or abuse.

Along with spelling out obligations, the institution of family makes some assumptions about authority—about who has the

legitimate right to control or influence the lives of others (Hunter, 1991). In other societies, such authority may be granted to someone outside the nuclear family, such as the father's brother or the community at large. In American society, parents have the legal right to control their children. However, in cases of multiple parents (birth parents, adoptive parents, stepparents, foster parents, and so on) the lines of authority may be murky. Courts must sometimes determine who has legitimate authority over children, as in custody cases where biological parents have attempted to regain custody of children who had been previously put up for adoption.

"Living Together": Family as Household. Another condition of the official American definition of family is that the family group share a common residence. Indeed, for many social scientists, common residence is *the* defining characteristic of family (for example, Murdock, 1949). It reflects the view that individuals who make up a family constitute a single identifiable entity that is located in a common space.

The belief that members of a nuclear family ought to live together is common but not universal. Among the Kipsigis of Kenya, for instance, the mother and children live in one house while the father lives in another (Stephens, 1963). Among the Thonga of southern Africa, children live with their grandmothers once they stop breastfeeding. They remain there for several years and are then returned to their parents. On the traditional Israeli kibbutz, or commune, children are raised not in the home of their biological parents but in an "infants' house," where they are cared for by a trained nurse (Nanda, 1994). Wealthy European families may send their children away to boarding schools, where they spend the majority of their childhood.

In our own society, there are situations in which members of nuclear families do not occupy a common household. Consider, for instance, the "commuter marriage." A commuter marriage is one in which spouses spend at least several nights a week in separate residences yet are still married and intend to remain so (Gertsel & Gross, 1984). Over a million commuter marriages exist in the United States today. Marriages in which spouses live apart much of the time have always existed. Careers such as the military, the merchant marines, professional sports, and entertainment often require spouses to travel for long periods. Today, however, commuter marriages are likely to be the result of both husband and wife having careers that involve commitments to different locations. ▲ While the difficulties of such arrangements are substantial, no one would deny that they are families.

▲ *Chapter 4 examines commuter marriages as a contemporary adaptation to career demands.*

It's also true that common household residence does not, in and of itself, determine whether a unit is a family. Perhaps you are currently living with a roommate. Not only do you share an address but you are likely to share domestic chores and household expenses as well. You may both even feel very close to one another, sharing personal experiences, helping each other in times of need, and so on. Yet most people wouldn't consider roommates family. Your common residence is assumed to be the result of economic convenience rather than emotional commitment.

The growth of "nonfamily households" (elderly people living with friends, roommates sharing an apartment, cohabiting couples, young single people, and so on) over the past several decades has been dramatic. In 1960, 15 percent of all households were nonfamily; today the figure has more than doubled to over 30 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997a).

"Related by Marriage": Family as Legal Entity. Marriage is the legal cornerstone of the official definition of family. The U.S. Supreme Court once declared that marriage is "noble" and "intimate to the degree of being sacred" (Stoddard, 1992, p. 17).

Most of us take for granted that monogamy, the marriage of one man and one woman, is the fundamental building block of the family. Only married people are granted the *culturally legitimate* right to reproduce and therefore create enduring family ties. Some people may have several spouses over their lifetimes, but they are allowed only one at a time (a phenomenon known as serial monogamy). And some families do exist without a married couple. But monogamous marriage continues to be the only adult intimate relationship that is legally recognized, culturally approved, and endorsed by the Internal Revenue Service. It is still the one relationship in which sexual activity is not only acceptable but expected.

Monogamous marriage, like the family in general, is an institution, a patterned way of life that includes a set of commonly known roles, statuses, and expectations: "People know about it; they can describe it; and they have spent a lifetime learning how to react to it. The *idea* of marriage is larger than any individual marriage. The *role* of husband or wife is greater than any individual who takes on that role" (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983, p. 318). No other intimate relationship has achieved such status. Despite its current state of disrepair and the public concern with its disintegration, monogamous marriage remains the cultural standard against which all other types of intimate relationships are judged.

But even though marriage is undeniably important, not all states agree as to who can and can't marry. Today, some states (such as Pennsylvania) still recognize common-law marriage. These marriages are agreements by which couples who have not had their relationships validated religiously or civilly are considered legally married if they've lived together long enough. Some states allow first cousins to marry, others don't; the minimum legal age for marriage varies from state to state, as does recognition of such contracts across state lines (F. Johnson, 1996).

Despite these variations, it's hard to imagine a society that is not structured around the assumption that the vast majority of adults will live in a monogamous marriage. Yet many cultures around the world allow an individual to have several husbands or wives at the same time (an arrangement known as polygamy). Some anthropologists have estimated that about 75 percent of the world's societies accept some type of polygamy, although few members within those societies actually have the resources to afford more than one spouse (Murdock, 1957; Nanda, 1994). In some parts of northern India, for instance, a woman will sometimes have more than one husband. The husbands are always brothers. The practice stems from economic pressures. This area's terrain is rugged—steep forests and mountains leave only about a quarter of the land suitable for farming. With so little land to support a larger population, having all sons in one family marry the same woman ensures the control of childbirth and keeps the family wealth under one roof (Fan, 1996). It's estimated that roughly 10 out of 100 families in this region still practice polygamy.

A Russian politician recently made headlines worldwide by introducing a bill in the Kremlin that would allow a man to have several wives. There are 9 million more women than men in Russia, and the country is experiencing a dramatic decrease in the size of its population. Fearful of the possibility that ethnic Russians would soon be outnumbered in their own country, this politician advocated polygamy to create a new generation of what he called "Russian wolves."

Even in the United States, certain groups practice polygamy. Between 20,000 and 50,000 members of a dissident Mormon sect in Colorado, Utah, and Arizona live in households made up of a man with two or more wives (Altman & Ginat, 1996; Johnson, 1991). Although this practice is technically illegal, these states have made no arrests for polygamy since the 1950s.

"Related by Blood or Adoption": Family as Kinship Group. No matter what form it takes, marriage is important in all societies because it serves as the legally sanctioned setting for reproduction. While not all sexual activity in marriage leads to the birth of children and not all children are born to married couples, sexual reproduction in families is the core symbol of kinship (Schneider, 1980).

Even adoption is based symbolically on the biological model of kinship. Adoption approximates reproduction. Once adopted, children are treated and raised just as if they were produced biologically by the adoptive parents. The kinship ties established by adoption are just as powerful and enduring as those established by birth. ▲ As such, adoption presents no challenge to the image of family assembled around a biological core of parent(s) and children (Weston, 1991).

▲ *The issue of transracial adoption, which disturbs some because of kinship implications, is discussed in Chapter 5.*

At birth everyone inherits two separate bloodlines, raising the question of which bloodline—the mother's or the father's—is to be more important for an individual's heredity. These designations are vital because they determine not only names but authority, ownership of property, and inheritance. However, kinship has as much to do with social norms as it does with genetic facts. Definitions of kinship—who is related to whom across generations—vary from culture to culture.

In some societies, kin are connected by father-child links (called patrilineal descent). In such societies, a woman typically takes her husband's name. Children downplay or ignore their connections with members of their mother's family, showing allegiance and loyalty to kin on the father's side of the family. So, for instance, a mother's sister—whom we'd call an "aunt"—has no culturally recognized role in the family.

In other societies, the family group is made up of people connected by mother-child links (called matrilineal descent). Here a child's status and heritage are traced through his or her mother's lineage, and the father's kin are not considered part of the family. For instance, the Hopi, a Pueblo group in the American Southwest, are a matrilineal society. The relationship a Hopi child maintains with his or her father's relatives may be affectionate, but it involves little direct cooperation or recognized authority.

Finally, in some societies (such as the United States) children trace their descent and define their family relationships through both parents' bloodlines (bilateral descent). Although American women typically take their husbands' names when they marry and children take their fathers' names, descent and inheritance are linked to both parents. We may distinguish between our *paternal* and *maternal* grandparents and even favor one set over the other, but both are equally recognized as kin. Neither side of the family is expected to exert special influence and power over the children.

In bilateral descent societies, the potential for kin relationships can be quite extensive. If you were to map out a family chart of kin on both sides of your family, the size and complexity of your family tree could be immense. But at some point we all stop counting distant kin—for instance, fourth cousins—as family.

Blood Families and Chosen Families

You can see that the official, broad definition of family is not as straightforward as you might expect. In everyday usage, *family* is a significantly more elastic term than implied by the U.S. Bureau of the Census definition: two or more people, living together, who are related by marriage, blood, or adoption.

It seems that today, compared with the 1950s and 1960s, who we consider "family" is increasingly a matter of choice rather than legal obligation. Families can now consist of people who are tied to one another not by law, birth, or blood but by their commitments, love, and ability to confide in one another (Settles, 1987). These relationships form a safety net of significant connections to choose from in case of need. Hence, people today are apt to use the word *family* to describe a group of individuals who have achieved a significant degree of emotional closeness and sharing, even if they're not related. In a national survey, 75 percent of respondents, when asked to define *family,* replied, "a group of people who love and care for each other" (cited in Scanzoni & Marsiglio, 1991).

An approach to defining family that relies more on feelings and less on formal structure is appealing to many family scholars. Compare the following definition from the American Home Economics Association (AHEA) to the Census Bureau definition we examined earlier:

> AHEA defines the family unit as two or more persons who share resources, share responsibility for decisions, share values and goals, and have commitment to one another over time. The family is that climate that one "comes home to" and it is this network of sharing and commitments that most accurately describes the family unit, regardless of blood, legal ties, adoption or marriage. (quoted in Christensen, 1990, p. 36)

Notice that the AHEA definition emphasizes emotional ties, commitment, and cooperation, not formally recognized relationships.

One prominent sociologist defines family as "a unit comprising two or more persons who live together for an extended period of time, and who share in one or more of the following: work (for wages and house), sex, care and feeding of children, and intellectual, spiritual, and recreational activities (D'Antonio, 1983, p. 92). Another author argues that the concept of family should apply to "people who have shared history, who have loved each other . . . lived through major parts of each other's lives together, [and] who share professional interests, economic needs, political views or sexual preference" (Lindsey, 1981, pp. 179–188).

We all know of situations in which *fictive kin*—people other than legal or biological kin—play the family's role in providing for the emotional needs of its members. Sometimes roommates play this role. Or perhaps you have a close family friend whom you've referred to for years as "Uncle So-and-So" or "Aunt So-and-So" even though he or she isn't a sibling of either parent. In some situations, whom you choose to identify as family is left to your discretion. The family status of in-laws and step-relatives, for instance, is often left to the judgment of individual families. The powerful emotional connections we can form with these "chosen relatives" shows that, in practice, family is rarely limited to formally recognized kin relations.

Structural changes in society and changes in contemporary lifestyles (geographic mobility, high rates of divorce and childlessness, kin-group rejection, and so on) compel many people to seek from other groups the kinds of satisfactions that are typically sought from kin (Marciano, 1988). For instance, as life expectancy increases, some

elderly people whose children are unable or unwilling to take care of them are turning to longtime friends for companionship, emotional support, and practical assistance.

Fictive kin have historically played an important role in some African-American communities. In her book *All Our Kin,* anthropologist Carol Stack describes "family" relationships in a midwestern black neighborhood called "the Flats." The people in this community used many kinship terms to celebrate relationships based on caring, loving, and close friendship. ▲ These "kin" felt the sort of obligations, responsibilities, and loyalties typically associated with blood relations. Consider the family meanings that one resident bestowed on the people in her life:

> Billy, a young black woman in the Flats, was raised by her mother and her mother's "old man." She has three children of her own by different fathers. Billy says, "Most people kin to me are in this neighborhood, right here in the Flats, but I got people in the South, in Chicago, and in Ohio, too. I couldn't tell most of their names and most of them aren't really kinfolk to me. Starting down the street from here, take my father, he ain't my daddy, he's no father to me. I ain't got but one daddy and that's Jason. The one who raised me. My kids' daddies, that's something else, all their daddies' people really take to them—they always doing things and making a fuss about them. We help each other out and that's what kinfolks are all about. (Stack, 1974, p. 4)

▲ *You can read more about the reasons for such diversity in African-American families in Issue 6.*

Stack found that the community's informal system of parental rights and duties determines who is eligible to be a member of a child's "family." This system often doesn't coincide with the official law of the state concerning parenthood. For instance, a girl who gives birth as a teenager might not raise and nurture the child. While she may live in the same house as the baby, an "othermother"—her mother, aunt, older sister, cousin, or family friend—may do the actual child rearing. Young mothers and their first-born daughters are often raised as sisters. This sort of acquired parenthood lasts throughout the child's lifetime. The child learns to distinguish his or her "mother" and "father" (the biological parents) from his or her "mama" and "daddy" (the people who raised him or her). Most of the time—Stack estimates about 80 percent—the mother and the "mama" are the same person. But in those other cases, the "mama" can be a grandmother, an aunt, or someone else, when relatives conclude that the mother is not emotionally ready to nurture the child and fulfill her parental duties. The "mama's" relatives and their husbands and wives also become a part of the child's extended family.

In sum, Stack found that the people she studied clearly operate within two different family systems: the folk system of their community and the legal system of the courts and welfare offices. People are recognized as family not because they have biological ties but because they assume the recognized responsibilities of kin—they "help each other out." Given the pressures of the economy in these communities, this expanded definition of family and the respect afforded to "othermothers" have served a critical role in people's lives, providing much-needed support.

The Controversy over Gay Families

One of the most contentious debates concerning how elastic the definition of family ought to be is whether gay and lesbian

couples should be granted the right to marry and thereby create culturally and legally "legitimate" families. ▲ Traditional heterosexual marriages have long benefited from legal and social recognition. Marriage partners can take part in a spouse's health insurance plan and pension program, share the rights of inheritance and community property, make a claim on a spouse's rent-controlled apartment, receive Social Security and veterans' benefits, including medical and educational services, file joint tax returns, and receive crime victims' recovery benefits (Hunter, 1991; Sherman, 1992). These legal and economic advantages were designed to encourage the stability and interdependence of the traditional family unit.

▲ *Read Chapter 2 for further discussion of sexual orientation and intimate relationships.*

Such benefits have historically been denied to cohabiting heterosexual couples, living arrangements involving long-term platonic roommates, and, of course, homosexual couples—all of which may nevertheless have the same degree of economic and emotional dependence found in heterosexual marriages.

In the past, gay and lesbian couples either had to live with their legally unrecognized status or find ways other than marriage to establish such recognition. One rather creative method of approximating a legal relationship was adoption. In one case, a 22-year-old New York man petitioned to adopt his 26-year-old male partner. The parties testified that "they wish[ed] to establish a legally cognizable relationship in order to facilitate inheritance, the handling of their insurance policies and pension plans, and the acquisition of suitable housing" (quoted in Anderson, 1988, p. 360). They contended that they wanted a "more permanent legal bond" that would provide their relationship with some security. The court approved the petition. This arrangement brought the relationship within the purview of the law and automatically created certain legal rights and duties in both partners (Anderson, 1988).

Recently, many communities have taken a more conventional legal route, enacting "domestic partnership" laws which recognize homosexual unions (as well as heterosexual cohabiting relationships) and grant them some "family-like" legal rights. Couples officially register their relationships and in so doing formally declare that they have "an intimate, committed relationship of mutual caring," that they live together, and that they agree to be responsible for each other's basic living expenses.

Such laws have been enacted in the state of Vermont and in cities such as San Francisco and West Hollywood, California; Ithaca, New York; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Washington, D.C.; Seattle, Washington; and Madison, Wisconsin. The laws extend full spousal rights such as health insurance, life insurance, pension benefits, employee discounts, and health club membership to the domestic partners of city workers. In addition, approximately 500 companies and organizations including Sony, IBM, Walt Disney, Hewlett-Packard, Microsoft, Xerox, Ben & Jerry's, Lotus, Apple Computer, Time Warner, the Democratic National Committee, and the American Sociological Association now grant domestic partners the same benefits traditionally granted to spouses (Griffin, 1993).

The Push to Legalize Gay Marriage

Although domestic partnership laws and policies go a long way in legally recognizing gay and lesbian relationships, many people feel such changes are inadequate. They argue that domestic partnerships are still "not quite" marriages and therefore not quite families in the eyes of the public and the law. Consequently they remain culturally and legally second-class. For instance, in 1991 the governing body of the Presbyterian Church ruled

that same-sex union ceremonies could be performed in the denomination's churches by ordained pastors so long as the ceremonies were not considered marriages (Sherman, 1992).

Advocates of gay marriage argue that allowing gay and lesbian individuals to legally marry would result in a more secure, stable, and protective relationship. In 1990 a woman whose lesbian partner had died of cancer charged AT&T (her deceased lover's employer) with discrimination for refusing to pay her the same death benefits it would have paid to a surviving spouse. In her suit she claimed that her relationship was as much a marriage as any heterosexual union. She and her lover had even formalized their relationship in a 1977 ceremony in which they exchanged vows and rings in the company of parents and friends. They bought a house together and raised her children from a previous marriage together. AT&T said its benefits were for legal spouses only, and since the law did not recognize homosexual unions, neither did the company (Lewin, 1990). If the women's relationship had been legally recognized as a marriage, however, the company would have had clear responsibilities and a definite, institutionalized commitment to the surviving partner.

Some advocates argue that legalizing gay marriage would lead to greater public acceptance of homosexual people. Having the right to legally marry and start families would combat the all-too-common belief that gay relationships are only about sexual activity and would force heterosexuals to acknowledge that gay couples can be seriously committed to each other and can take on traditional family responsibilities.

Legalization of gay marriage would therefore show that homosexual men and women could be just as "family oriented" as anybody else. ▲ Far from being a repudiation of family, then, the desire to legally marry acknowledges the ideal of family.

▲ *Chapter 4 examines some of the issues facing gay and lesbian parents.*

Opposition to Legalizing Gay Marriage

Opposition to gay marriage nevertheless remains strong. According to a recent poll, nearly 70 percent of Americans oppose homosexual marriages (cited in "Marriage and divorce," 1996). Gay men and lesbians are typically thought of as individuals, but not as family members, reflecting a pervasive belief that homosexuality and family are mutually exclusive concepts (reported in Allen & Demo, 1995). Indeed, claiming a gay or lesbian identity has typically been considered a rejection of family (reported in Weston, 1991).

To many people, the power and significance of marriage as an institution rest on its uniqueness—the belief that it is not one lifestyle among many but the fundamental intimate arrangement in society. ▲ Their concern is that when relationships that aren't marriages start being treated as if they are, marriage loses its power and significance. One U.S. congressman called homosexual relationships "the most vicious attack on traditional family values that our society has seen in the history of our republic" (quoted in Hunter, 1991, p. 189).

▲ *Issue 2 examines the sources of our image of the "traditional" family.*

Currently, no state legally recognizes same-sex marriage, although in 1996 a circuit court judge in Hawaii ruled that a ban on gay marriage was unconstitutional, a first step toward full legal status. In fact, twelve states have actively banned gay marriage, and another six states are attempting legislative bans. In 1996 President Clinton signed the

Defense of Marriage Act, which formally reaffirmed the definition of marriage as the union of one man and one woman, authorized all states to refuse to accept same-sex marriages from other states (if they ever became legal at the state level), and denied federal pension, health, and other benefits to same-sex couples. However, because each state—not the federal government—has the right to determine who can and cannot legally marry, the bill is primarily a moral statement about the definition of family.

It's important to note that opposition to gay marriage comes not only from people who disapprove of homosexuality and perceive it as a threat to traditional definitions of family but also from some gays and lesbians. These opponents argue that legalizing gay marriage would render gays and lesbians even more invisible to the larger society and undermine the movement to establish a separate and unique gay culture and identity (Ettelbrick, 1992). It would be a civil rights victory, but a subcultural defeat (Johnson, 1996).

Furthermore, they fear that homosexual married couples would be expected to behave just like heterosexual married couples, amounting to an acceptance of a heterosexual standard for what a successful intimate relationship should look like. This sort of arrangement would subsequently diminish the notion that valid and committed relationships can exist outside traditional marriage. In fact, some gay opponents of homosexual marriage argue that the absence of marriage as a dominant, regulating institution in their intimate lives actually gives them the space to define their families in richer ways, to include friends, neighbors, and community (F. Johnson, 1996).

Some gay and lesbian activists take the argument further, contending that having no "marriage" or even "family" should constitute a point of pride for homosexual people (Altman, 1979). Indeed, some gay people look down upon homosexual parents for having failed to "escape" the family and for trying to gain acceptance in mainstream society by approximating the "traditional" family (Lynch, 1982).

In sum, more is at stake in this debate than the emotional rewards of formalizing shared commitment in a loving relationship and the practical rewards of legal recognition of gay and lesbian marriage. This issue is fundamentally about what arrangements we as a culture believe deserve the label "family." These beliefs can ultimately shape the law, public policy, and the contours of our everyday lives.

The Symbolism of Family

Judging from the strong emotions evoked by debates over the definition of family, it's clear that family is important not just for what it looks like but for what it symbolizes. Many people strongly believe that as the family goes, so goes the country. ▲ It stands for what we, as a culture, hold dear. Hence,

> the task of defining what the American family *is* [is] integral to the very task of defining America itself. . . . Obviously more is at stake than a dictionary definition of "the family." The debate actually takes form as a political judgment about the fate of *one particular conception of the family and family life* [emphases in original]. (Hunter, 1991, pp. 177, 180)

▲ *Issue 8 addresses the perceived link between family decline and social decline.*

In American society the idea of family has become a powerful symbol of decency. Disneyland and Disneyworld, for instance, are considered family theme parks because

they supposedly emphasize the wholesomeness of the recreational activities they provide. You'll find no bars, strip clubs, or gambling halls there. Likewise, every video rental store has a family section. But the films you'll find in this section aren't necessarily about families. Instead the label "family" presumably identifies films that are devoid of graphic sex and violence, whose themes the entire family can enjoy together.

When politicians rail against policies and practices considered "antifamily" (read indecent and immoral) they are typically signaling their support for "family values" and espousing a view that the American family is being attacked and threatened by dangerous forces of change. Today rivals in elections try to situate themselves as the more "profamily" candidate. Having a smiling spouse and children displayed prominently in photos and television coverage is practically a prerequisite for getting elected. During the 1992 presidential campaign, Vice President Dan Quayle stirred up intense feelings about the definition of family when he criticized the television character Murphy Brown, who had a baby out of wedlock and without any intention of having a husband or father to help raise the child. Quayle directed his attack against those who "seem to think the family is an arbitrary arrangement of people who decided to live under one roof, that fathers are dispensable, and that parents need not be married or even of opposite sexes" (quoted in Quindlen, 1992, p. E19).

Quayle's views reflect a belief, held by many, that an expanded definition of family demeans its symbolic importance. From this perspective, family is a sacred label that should be applied only to the most traditional type of family: married parents and their children. To those who subscribe to this position, family is the very cornerstone upon which the entire foundation of society rests and therefore shouldn't be used casually or taken lightly. People should not have the right to define themselves as family however they see fit. Those who seek to expand the definition of family to apply to all sorts of relationships are believed to be emptying it of its symbolic meaning and power (Gellott, 1985).

But to many others, the rhetoric of family values is little more than a thin cover for a particular political agenda. According to these skeptics, those who deplore the greater visibility of cohabiting and homosexual couples, the increasing numbers of single and working mothers, and high rates of divorce are making a rather explicit judgment about what we ought to define as "appropriate" families. Many people believe, in contrast, that the shape and configuration of a family are less important than the emotional bonds and feelings of mutual obligation that can exist between people. It doesn't matter so much whether a child has two biological parents, a biological parent and a stepparent, a single parent, or two parents of the same sex as long as that child has someone to take care of him or her.

The point here is that there is no agreement among the media, society, and academia about what families are, what they should be, or what the implications of recent social changes will be. These disagreements aren't always politically motivated. They can arise simply and earnestly from people's different perspectives, values, beliefs, and desires.

Something to Think About

One of the issues that most deeply divides American society today is the definition of the term *family* and the privileging of particular family forms over others. You've seen that there's more to family than meets the eye. Some cultures have ideas very different from ours about what sorts of family arrangements are normal and natural. In this society, most people's lives depart in some way from the traditional nuclear family depicted in the official definition of family. This diversity raises some interesting questions:

1. Should the societal recognition of family be limited to blood and legal relations, or should we be able to choose whomever we want to be our family? What is society's interest in controlling which arrangements we call family?
2. As we move toward the twenty-first century, do you think the concept of family will expand to acknowledge the validity of many diverse relationships and living arrangements, or will it contract, reinforcing the legitimacy and desirability of the "traditional" family?
3. Which definition of family do you think ought to provide the basis for official family policy?