

Examining Family Issues and Controversies

- **Part I of this book examines several controversial issues that provide the backdrop against which people experience their own families and form opinions and beliefs about families in general. In this section you will probe questions such as, Which arrangements get to be called a “family”? Is the institution of family breaking down? Should families be completely private? How do people balance personal interests and needs with family obligations? Do families need religion to thrive? The information presented in response to these questions is designed to provoke personal reflection, critical thought, and impassioned discussion.**

What is a family?

Hours after the terrorist attack on the Pentagon and New York's World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, a major network newscaster completed his report by saying, "It's in times like these that all Americans become a *family*." Several days later, a member of the New York Mets baseball team said, "In New York, everybody's a *family* right now."

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, DC, 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 rela-

tionships in the face of what they perceived as certain death. Before imprisonment, the people who would become these survivors' "parents," "children," "brothers," and "sisters" were complete strangers; many came from different countries and spoke different languages.

In 2000, the Olive Garden Italian restaurant chain began a new television advertising campaign that featured the tag line "When you're here, you're *family*." This image pervades the company's Web site: "Olive Garden is a *family* of local restaurants focused on delighting every guest with a genuine Italian dining experience. . . . We offer a comfortable, home-like setting where guests are welcomed like *family*."

It seems that nothing is more obvious and commonplace than the concept of family. Family is something that everyone can relate to. We're all born into a family of one sort or another and will spend at least part of our lives inside one. Ideas about what families look like are so clear that if someone asked you to pick out families strolling through a large shopping mall, you'd probably have no trouble doing so.

Yet all these examples illustrate the varied, fluid, and somewhat unexpected ways people use the term *family* and its powerful connotations. In all these

What makes a family a family? Why are some groups granted family status and others not? What does a family do for its members that other groups can't?



Certain holidays, rituals, and other celebrations invite or even require family participation. The people at this backyard barbecue seem to be close knit and genuinely happy. Do you think they are a family? What features in this photo are you using as evidence of family relationships? Is more than one family present at the cookout? How can you tell? If no children were present, would you be less inclined to consider this group of people a family?

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. Notice how much weaker the message would have been if, say, the newscaster or the baseball player had referred to the shock and grief of *U.S. citizens*, 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 Olive Garden inspire feelings of comfort in potential customers if their advertisements read, "When you're here, you're *an important customer*"? Certainly not.

The really curious thing, though, is that in none of these examples was the word *family* used to describe the relationships most people usually think of as family—husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and so on. Instead, it was used to describe real and imagined relationships based on love, commitment, sacrifice, and obligation.

Obviously, 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.

Indeed, a nationwide poll conducted by the Roper Organization 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).

These statistics and examples point up one of the most fundamental and deceptively simple questions facing people who study family: Just exactly what is a family? Which groups of people get to be called a family? Conversely, which groups of people *can't* claim to be families? Far from being an ob-

scure issue of linguistic and philosophical debate argued in the hallowed halls of academia, the definition of *family* has very real and very critical consequences for us all. A family may be in line to receive such benefits as housing, health care, and sick leave, not to mention legitimate recognition within the community (Popenoe, 1993). People who fall outside the definition of *family*, however, not only are ineligible for such benefits, but their relationships may also be considered illegitimate, inappropriate, or immoral (Hartman, 1994). Ideas about which family forms are acceptable, normal, desirable, and praiseworthy determine which forms are considered abnormal, problematic, and in need of repair or condemnation.

Images of Family

Our ideas about what families are come to us partly from the people around us. From the time we are small, we are exposed to ideas about what families ought to look like and how they ought to function. Our immediate family is an obvious model, and older relatives can provide images of past families. We are even exposed to alternative images as we become acquainted with the different family structures of neighbors and friends. But these personal experiences are not the only source of information we have on the definition of family.

Many of our ideas about families come from the media: books, newspapers, magazines, films, and especially, television. For 50 years, television has served as a high-powered cultural lens on U.S. families (Stacey, 1996b). Between 1946 and 1990, close to 400 fictional families appeared on prime-time network programming alone (Moore, 1992). Add commercials, daytime soap operas and talk shows, and news stories into the mix, and you get a sense of how pervasive television images of families have been throughout the years. For the most part, these images have tended to be conventional and narrow in scope, fostering a largely inaccurate version of family reality.

One study of all long-running prime-time families since the 1950s found that on TV the traditional nuclear family predominates. Two-thirds of

these shows depicted “conventional” families—families that consist of married couples living together with their children or nuclear families sharing a household with one or more members of their extended families (Moore, 1992). The overwhelming majority of families (88 percent) were middle class or higher. Ninety-four percent of the shows featured white families. Interestingly, at the time of this study there were more white TV families with black members (usually adopted children) than there were black families. Only 14 percent of the programs featured childless couples.

A more recent study found that prime-time, entertainment TV still presents a distorted view of family life: Most adults are men, almost no one is over 50, child care is almost never a problem, and elder care comes up even less (National Partnership for Women and Families, 1998). After analyzing 150 episodes of 92 different programs, the researchers discovered that adult TV characters are disproportionately male, young, and free of family obligations as compared to real adults. Not surprisingly, this study found that 45 percent of U.S. adults say no TV families are like theirs, and another 39 percent say they can find “only a few” families like theirs.

In some ways, however, media images of families have changed dramatically over the years. In the 1950s and early 1960s, shows like *Leave It to Beaver*, *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Make Room for Daddy*, *Father Knows Best*, *The Donna Reed Show*, and *The Dick Van Dyke Show* provided optimistic, homogeneous images of U.S. families. With some notable exceptions—such as the childless, working-class Kramdens in *The Honeymooners* or the urban, interethnic Ricardos in *I Love Lucy*—these early television families were happy, prosperous, suburban, and white. They consisted of husband-father breadwinners and nurturing wife/mothers whose primary task was to look good in an apron and keep peace among the children. In the 1950s a viewer would have been hard pressed to find on television the sorts of people and families that, in reality, characterized much of U.S. society at the time: the old, the nonwhite, those not in the middle class, or people in nontraditional households (Coontz, 1992). Instead, the viewing audience was presented with nuclear families without serious economic problems or embarrassing histo-

ries. The most pressing problems could be solved in 30 minutes with a few sage words from Dad or a plate of Mom’s chocolate chip cookies. No wonder when people today look back on families of the past, they gravitate toward these blissful “good old days” TV images. To this day, reruns of these old shows remain a popular fixture on nightly cable TV.

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The social upheavals of the late 1960s and early 1970s motivated networks to create shows that were more “relevant” and “realistic.” The working-class families on *All in the Family* and *Good Times* demonstrated that family life wasn’t always a middle-class haven. Conflict was a part of their day-to-day existence. Television families began making small but significant forays into the uncharted territory of social problems such as poverty, violence, drugs, and racism. TV families were even becoming a little less traditional in their structure. *The Brady Bunch* featured a sugar-coated white, middle-class, suburban family, but the Bradys were a blended family that sometimes had to deal—albeit cheerily—with dilemmas posed by step-siblings and stepparents. The show *One Day at a Time* featured a divorced woman raising two children alone. *Three’s Company* consisted of three single adults—one man and two women—living in the same household. Popular shows such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Laverne and Shirley* featured single women whose emotional nurturing came primarily from close friends rather than family. These characters enjoyed freedoms that had previously been taboo for women on television.

During the 1980s and 1990s, a time when conservative politics and “family values” became more popular, the traditional television family reasserted its dominance—most notably through shows such as

The Cosby Show, *Family Ties*, and *Home Improvement*—even though the number of people living in intact families in the real world continued to decline. Although many popular shows—such as *Roseanne*, *The Simpsons*, and *Married with Children*—were offering an unsparing portrayal of the ugly side of family life, the tone was humorous and the generally positive emotional interactions that we associate with family relationships remained. These families may have been flawed, but they were still cohesive, especially in the face of crisis.

In the early 2000s, the television portrayal of families has become more diverse. The theme of the dysfunctional yet intact family can still be seen in sitcoms such as *Malcolm in the Middle*, *That 70s Show*, and *Grounded for Life*. Other shows—such as *Queer as Folk*, *The Sopranos*, *Once and Again*, *The Fighting Fitzgeralds*, *Frazier*, *Judging Amy*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and *Providence*—explore various extended, blended, single-parent, and even more nontraditional family arrangements.

In recent years, some of the most popular television shows—most notably *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, *Ed*, *Sex and the City*, *Will and Grace*, and *Ally McBeal*—have drifted away from examining family groups to focus primarily on the lives of single people. However, these shows are not “antifamily” by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, many of the anxieties and travails that characters on these shows experience stem from a gap between their present singlehood and their desire for traditional family life—getting married, having children, and so on.

Television images of families have obviously changed over the years: Women now play a more dominant role than they once did in family shows, gay characters as well as single-parent and minority families are more common, and both mothers and fathers are more frequently seen outside the home (Cantor, 1991; Douglas & Olsen, 1996). However, television still tends to portray traditional gender roles within families. In television commercials, for instance, men (compared to women) are less often shown doing housework and spending time with children. When they are shown with children, men are more likely to be shown outdoors, with boys, and not with infants. Interestingly, men are rarely shown caring for daughters (G. Kaufman, 1999). Other dis-

crepancies between TV life and real life exist. One study reports that of all the “nonconventional” families on television, 79 percent feature single-parent households. But unlike real-life parents, most single parents on TV had suffered the death of a spouse and not divorce. In only 9 percent of cases was single parenthood the result of divorce (Moore, 1992).

In addition, the formulas of contemporary family programs remain quite similar to those aired in the 1950s (Cantor, 1991). The stories often revolve around teen and preteen mischief or parent-child conflict. The content of the conflict has, of course, changed. The 1950s argument over kissing and wearing too much makeup has evolved, in the 2000s, into an argument over sleeping with a boyfriend or purchasing contraceptives. But the dynamics of the situations portrayed remain remarkably similar, and parents and children almost always resolve their differences by the end of the show. No matter how “nontraditional” the lifestyle, the central virtue of family togetherness is still depicted as the main source of individual happiness and well-being for adults and children alike.

And rarely do television programs reflect the larger social and political contexts in which most U.S. residents live. Contemporary programs have addressed the tough problems of everyday life: drugs, poverty, unwanted pregnancy, and so forth. But for most of their history, television families have rarely tackled big problems such as the changing economy or ethnic conflict and political unrest abroad. Rather, these fictional families act out morality plays about appropriate and inappropriate beliefs and behaviors. The majority of TV programs teach correct (and ideal) social and sexual relationships (Cantor, 1991).

The significance of these trends in television programming is that they are far more than entertainment; they shape our ideas about what a family is and is not, how its members should relate to one another, and how a family should relate to the world. But television viewers (and readers of other mass media) are hardly passive recipients who absorb every message uncritically. Even young viewers actively watch and make judgments about characters based on their own personal experience. For example, 9- to 13-year-old girls in one recent study tended to dismiss as unrealistic families that did not

look and act like their own. These girls did, however, accept the family-oriented values they saw on television, probably because they were consistent with those they received at home (Fingerson, 1999). In short, people learn from others in their lives, as well as from the media, to dismiss and discount alternative forms of families and to laugh at or dislike unconventional characters who challenge accepted notions about family life (Currie, 1997).

The “Official” U.S. Definition of Family

With so much flux and variation in images of family, is it possible or even desirable to come up with a single definition? In fact, it *is* necessary if you are faced with the task, as the U.S. federal government is, of managing certain programs for families and providing certain benefits only to families.

The official definition of *family* comes from the U.S. Census Bureau, the government agency responsible for determining how many families there are in the United States. In compiling these statistics, this agency distinguishes between *households* and *families*. Households are defined as all persons or groups of persons who occupy a dwelling such as a house, apartment, single room, or other space intended to be living quarters. Households can consist of one person who lives alone or several people living together. A family, in contrast, is defined as two or more persons who are related by blood, marriage, or adoption and who live together as one household (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000a).

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Right away you can see this definition limits who may be considered family. Grown children who no

longer live with their parents are not part of their parents’ families. And what about other relatives—grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins? Most of us would consider them to be part of our family as well, even though they don’t live with us. For the most part, what social scientists call the *nuclear family*—the small unit consisting of a married couple with or without children or at least one parent and his or her children—is what gets all the attention.

How useful is this official definition of family? What does it imply about the nature of people’s relationships and responsibilities within families? To address 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, sister–brother, and so on. These relationships imply connections, bonds, attachments, and obligations *among people*, which is a key characteristic of any type of social group.

The groups called families differ from other types of social groups, however, such as friendship groups, social clubs, church groups, and so on (Beutler, Burr, Bahr, & Herrin, 1989). For one thing, involvement between family members is more intense than in other groups. The range of activities shared with family members is much broader than contacts with friends, co-workers, or other people in groups to which you belong. People 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 tend to 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 focused on the strained relationship between Mike Bibby, a star player for the University of Arizona Wildcats, and his estranged father, 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 his father had had on his life. But he could not escape the immutable fact that Henry is, and will always be, his father. People can certainly have lifelong relationships with close friends, but families are the only groups that virtually require lifetime membership.

The strong prospect for continuing 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 is projected to end in divorce sometime in the future (Cherlin, 1992)—this idea of permanence applied to families may seem hopelessly outdated. However, people still assume that those involved don't enter such relationships as temporary arrangements with a foreseeable, predetermined end.

Unlike 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 U.S. 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 implication of the official U.S. 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). This reflects the view that individuals who make up a family constitute a single identifiable entity 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). Once they stop breastfeeding, Thonga children of southern Africa go to live with their grandmothers. 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 a trained nurse cares for them (Nanda, 1994). Wealthy European families may send their children away to boarding schools where they spend most of their childhood.

In U.S. 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). Marriages in which spouses live apart much of the time have always existed. Careers such as the military, the merchant marine, professional sports, and entertainment often require spouses to travel for long periods. Today, however, commuter marriages are likely to re-

sult from both husband and wife having careers that involve commitments to different locations. Although the difficulties of such arrangements are substantial, no one would deny that the people involved in them are families.

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 even feel very close to each other, sharing personal experiences, helping out 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.

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It's often unclear exactly why some household arrangements are considered family and others not. Several years ago, for instance, a Cleveland woman was convicted and sentenced to five 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 because the two boys were first cousins rather than brothers, the arrangement was not considered a family.

Yet around the same time, 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. Under a zoning ordinance that limited residence in this area to stable and permanent "traditional family units" or their "functional equivalent,"

the borough had sought an injunction to prevent the students from using or occupying the home. 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 three years under conditions that met the requirement of a "stable and permanent living unit" (Thoresen, 1991).

The growth of "nonfamily households" over the past several decades has been dramatic (elderly people living with friends, roommates sharing an apartment, cohabiting couples, young single people, and so on). In 1960, 15 percent of all households were nonfamily; today the figure has more than doubled, rising to over 32 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001d).

"Related by Marriage": Family as Legal Entity

Marriage is the legal cornerstone of the official definition of family. Most people take for granted that *monogamy*, the marriage of one man and one woman, is the fundamental building block of family. Reproduction remains more socially acceptable when it occurs inside a marriage than outside. Some people may have several spouses over their lifetime, but in the United States 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 U.S. 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. Although the expectations of husbands and wives are always changing, and will differ from one couple to the next, the expectations people have

for spouses are far more culturally understood than for any other type of relationship, such as a “significant other” or “girlfriend.” Furthermore, no other intimate relationship has achieved such status or is privileged as highly as marriage. Despite public concern with its disintegration, monogamous marriage remains the cultural standard against which all other types of intimate relationships are judged.

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 spouses 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 (usually *polygyny*—the marriage of one man to multiple wives), 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, a woman sometimes has more than one husband (marriage of one woman to multiple husbands is known as *polyandry*). 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 child-birth 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 polyandry.

Even in the United States, certain groups practice polygyny. Between 30,000 and 50,000 members of a dissident Mormon sect in Utah live in polygynous

households (McCarthy, 2001). Although these marriages are technically illegal—Utah outlawed it as a condition of statehood in 1896—few polygynists are ever prosecuted. In fact, 2001 marked the first time in 50 years that a person was convicted on polygyny charges. However, this case shouldn’t be taken as an indicator that Utah is cracking down on polygyny. It involved a man—with five wives and twenty-five children—who decided to discuss his polygynous marriage openly on national talk shows, violating an unspoken rule that such arrangements would be quietly tolerated if the participants didn’t speak publicly about them.

“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. Although 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 mechanism of *kinship*—who is related to whom across generations (Schneider, 1980).

Even adoption is based symbolically on the biological model of kinship. Once adopted, children are treated and raised just as if they had been produced biologically by the adoptive parents. In fact, laws in some states keep adoption records sealed and refuse adoptees access to information about their birth parents and their biological relatives. Such laws were established to protect biological parents’ rights to privacy, but they also demonstrate that birth ties may be no more powerful or enduring than the kinship ties established by adoption. Thus adoption presents no challenge to the image of family assembled around a biological core of parent(s) and children (Weston, 1991).

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 also authority, ownership of property, and inheritance. However, kinship has as much to do with social

norms as with genetic facts. Definitions of kinship vary from culture to culture.

In some societies, kin are connected by father-child links (a system 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 (*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 U.S. Southwest, are a matrilineal community. 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.

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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 U.S. 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

The official, broad definition of family is not as straightforward or helpful 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.

Moreover, it seems that today, compared with the 1950s and 1960s, who people consider "family" is increasingly a matter of choice rather than legal obligation or biological connection. Families can now consist of people who are tied to one another not by law, birth, or blood but by 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 likely 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 by blood, marriage, or adoption. In a national survey, 75 percent of respondents, when asked to define *family*, chose, "a group of people who love and care for each other" (Scanzoni & Marsiglio, 1991).

An approach to defining family that relies more on feelings and less on formal structure appeals 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).

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In practice, family is rarely limited to formally recognized kin relations.

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Structural changes in society and changes in contemporary lifestyles compel many people to seek from other groups the kinds of satisfactions that are typically sought from kin (Marciano, 1988). We all know of situations in which *fictive kin*—people other than legal or biological relatives—play the family’s role in providing for the emotional and other needs of its members. Sometimes roommates play this role. As life expectancy increases, some elderly people whose children are unable or unwilling to take care of them are also turning to longtime friends for companionship, emotional support, and practical assistance. 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, which people 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 people can form with these “chosen relatives” show that, in practice, family is rarely limited to formally recognized kin relations.

Fictive kin have historically played an important role in some African-American communities. In her

book *All Our Kin*, anthropologist Carol Stack (1974) 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)

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 may not raise and nurture the child. Although 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” 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, claim a spouse’s rent-controlled apartment, receive Social Security and veterans’ benefits, including medical and educational services, file joint tax returns, determine the spouse’s medical and burial arrangements, and receive crime victims’ recovery benefits (Hunter, 1991; Sherman, 1992). In addition, spouses cannot be forced to testify in court against a partner and are granted visitation rights when the partner or his or her children are in an intensive care unit or prison (reported in Ingraham, 1999). These legal, social, and economic advantages encourage the stability and interdependence of the traditional family unit. Such benefits have historically been denied to cohabiting heterosexual couples, long-term platonic roommates, and homosexual couples—all of whom may

nevertheless have the same degree of economic and emotional interdependence found in heterosexual marriages.

Historically, 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 automatically created certain legal rights and duties for both partners (Anderson, 1988).

In 1999, the Canadian Supreme Court took a huge step toward legally recognizing homosexual unions when it struck down a heterosexual definition of the word *spouse*. The court ruled that Canada’s Family Law Act was unconstitutional because it limited to married or common-law heterosexual couples the right to claim alimony. The result of this ruling may be far-reaching, because laws governing adoption, marriage, pensions, and taxes also contain hundreds of references to spouses (“Canada overturns definition,” 1999).

The steps toward legally recognizing homosexual unions have usually been less dramatic. In 1999, France created a new form of legal partnership called a “civil solidarity pact,” which grants homosexual couples—as well as heterosexual cohabiting couples—some of the benefits and responsibilities of marriage. Under this law, couples are responsible for financially supporting each other. They can file joint income tax returns and are eligible for the other partner’s work benefits (Daley, 2000).

In 2000, Vermont became the first state to approve “civil unions,” legally recognized relationships that give gay couples all the benefits of marriage. 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.

Similar laws have been enacted at the local level in cities such as San Francisco and West Hollywood, California; Ithaca, New York; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Washington, DC; Seattle, Washington; and Madison, Wisconsin. These laws usually extend to the domestic partners of city workers full spousal rights such as health insurance, life insurance, pension benefits, employee discounts, and health club membership. In addition, thousands of employers—including over 100 Fortune 500 companies—now grant the partners of homosexual employees some of the same benefits traditionally granted to spouses (“Employers offer gays more benefits,” 2000).

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. Many elements of society still discriminate against homosexual relationships. For instance, in 1991 and again in 2000, the governing body of the Presbyterian Church ruled that same-sex union ceremonies could be performed in the denomination’s churches by ordained pastors—but only so long as the ceremonies were not considered marriages (Sherman, 1992; Stammer, 2000). The Vermont law stopped short of calling same-sex unions *marriages*. In fact, it defines a marriage as an arrangement between a man and a woman. To many, domestic partnerships are still “not quite” marriages and therefore not quite families. Consequently, homosexual partnerships remain culturally and legally second-class.

Advocates of gay marriage argue that allowing gay and lesbian individuals to legally marry would result in a more secure, stable, and protective relationship. Without legal status, such relationships can sometimes be difficult to preserve. For instance, in 1999, Samer Yahya, an Italian man attending college in Hartford, Connecticut, was attempting to return from a month-long visit with relatives in Rome. He never made it on the flight. Immigration agents determined that he had a flawed visa. He was strip-

searched and shackled to a bench overnight at the airport. The U.S. embassy in Rome denied him a new visa, saying that although he was a legitimate student, it was likely that he would stay in the country illegally after graduation because of a long-term relationship with a U.S. man. But this relationship was not a legal marriage, and so it gave Mr. Yahya no protection against deportation. Had they been a heterosexual married couple, Mr. Yahya would have automatically gained residency rights as the spouse of a U.S. citizen. U.S. immigration law considers foreign nationals whose work or student visas have expired to be “illegal immigrants,” even though they and their partners may share mortgages, businesses, homes, and even children. Immigration lawyers estimate that tens of thousands of relationships have been broken apart by this law (Jacobs, 1999).

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In addition to citing these sorts of practical problems, some advocates of gay marriage argue that legalizing it would lead to greater public acceptance of homosexual people in general. Having the right to legally marry and start families would combat the all-too-common belief that gay relationships are solely 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. Far from being a repudiation of family, then, the desire to legally marry acknowledges the ideal of family.

Opposition to Legalizing Gay Marriage

Opposition to gay marriage nevertheless remains strong. According to a recent poll, nearly 50 percent of U.S. Americans oppose homosexual marriages (Lester, 2000). Gay and lesbian partners are typically

thought of as individuals, 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. The U.S. Supreme Court once declared that marriage is “noble” and “intimate to the degree of being sacred” (Stoddard, 1992, p. 17). Its 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).

Currently, no state legally recognizes same-sex marriage. To date, 30 states have enacted laws explicitly defining as valid only marriages between a man and a woman. In 1996, President Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act, which formally reaffirmed the federal government’s 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. In 2001, the Alliance for Marriage, an organization of legal experts, scholars, and religious leaders proposed a federal amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would wipe out legal protections and benefits for same-sex couples.

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 a small number of gays and lesbians. These opponents argue that legalizing gay marriage would be a civil rights victory but 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; F. Johnson, 1996). Furthermore, some 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 (Lewin, 1996). 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 (Stacey, 2001). Indeed, some gay people look down on 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 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 fervently believe that as the family goes, so goes the country. It stands for what people, 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)

In U.S. 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 movie” 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 children and adults can enjoy together.

Politicians looking for a convenient way to whip up public sentiment often rail against policies and practices considered “antifamily” (read “indecent” and “immoral”), signal their support for “family values,” and espouse the view that the U.S. family is being attacked and threatened by dangerous forces of change. Today political candidates try to situate themselves as more “profamily” than their rivals. Having a smiling spouse and children displayed prominently in photos and television coverage is practically a prerequisite for getting elected.

Such positions reflect a belief, held by many, that an expanded definition of family demeans the family’s 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 ascribe to this position, family is the very foundation of society and therefore shouldn’t be 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 the high rates of divorce are making a rather explicit judgment about the sorts of human relationships people ought to define as “appropriate.” Many believe that the shape and configuration of a family are less important than the

emotional bonds and the feelings of mutual obligation that can exist between people. It doesn’t matter so much whether a child has two biological parents or lives in some other arrangement as long as that child has someone to take care of him or her. It doesn’t matter so much whether a couple is married as long as they, too, have a committed and caring relationship.

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 U.S. society today is the definition of the term *family* and the valuing 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. And in this society, most people’s lives depart in some way from the traditional nuclear family depicted in the official definition and in popular images of family. This diversity raises some interesting questions:

1. On prime-time television today, what family form predominates? Have you noticed significant social class or racial variation in TV families? How are “nontraditional” family arrangements handled (for example, single-parent households, divorce, gay families, interracial marriage)? What sorts of issues do TV families deal with? How do they solve problems? Make decisions? Deal with crises?
2. How do media images of family affect people’s own family experiences? Do the media (television, in particular) *create* images of family that viewers then use to form their own attitudes about family, or do they simply *reflect* the reality of family life as people experience it?
3. Should the societal recognition of family be limited to blood and legal relations, or should people be

able to choose whomever they want to be their family? What is society's interest in controlling which arrangements people call family?

4. In the near future, 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? Explain.

5. Which definition of family do you think ought to provide the basis for official family policy? Explain.

For More On . . .

See . . .

Family as household

"Coping Strategies of Dual-Earner Couples" in Chapter 7

Family as kinship

"Adoption and the Primacy of Genetic Parenthood" in Chapter 8

Gay families

"Sexuality" in Chapter 5
