Marriage & Family
The Quest for Intimacy

Tenth Edition

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MARRIAGE AND FAMILY: THE QUEST FOR INTIMACY, TENTH EDITION

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To Jeffrey Mathew, Krista Julianne, Benjamin Brindle,
David Christopher, John Robert, Adelaide Jeanette, and Robert John
Who are embarking on the quest

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PREFACE

What do you want out of life? If you are like most Americans, you would probably include happiness in your answer. But where can you find happiness? We wrote this text because we believe your personal happiness is crucially tied up with the quality of your intimate relationships. The text not only will provide you with a basic understanding of marriage and family life but also will show you how you can apply the knowledge you gain to enrich your life. In other words, this is not only a text; it's a practical guide as well. It is conceptual and theoretical social science, but it is also *applied* social science. The former comes from the wealth of information and the empirical work of the hundreds of researchers we discuss. The latter is found in the "Principles for Enhancing Intimacy" sections presented in each chapter as well as in the "Personal," "Comparison," and "What Do You Think?" inserts. Hopefully, by the time you complete this book, you will have a thorough understanding of marriage and family life today and an understanding of the steps you can take to enhance the quality of your own intimate relationships.

ORGANIZATION

We have organized the book to answer a series of questions: What is the context in which intimate relationships occur? What is the meaning of intimate relationships, and how do we establish them? What is the nature of intimacy for married couples? What is the nature of intimacy in the family? What kinds of things threaten intimate relationships, and how do people cope with those threats? What is family life like in the later years? Is it all worth it?

Part One addresses *context,* discussing beliefs and dreams about marriage and the family, the diversity of family life, and the gender roles and sexuality that are integral to intimacy.

Part Two explores the *meaning of intimate relationships* and how they are established. We discuss the process of getting involved with someone and falling in love. We also note the special case of those who remain single and how they deal with intimate relationships.

Part Three looks at *the nature of, and problems with, intimacy in marriage and family life.* We discuss such issues as making the transition from singlehood to marriage, communication, conflict, work, and parenting.

Part Four is an examination of various *threats to intimate relationships.* Family crises, including alcoholism and violence as well as numerous other stressors, put strains on the family. Separation and divorce are one way of dealing with the strains. Those who do get divorced are likely to remarry at some point, so one chapter explores the reconstituted family.

Finally, Part Five looks at the *family in later years.* We include such topics as the sandwich generation, the empty nest, grandparenting, and death and grief. We close with our answer to the question of whether, considering both the challenges and the rewards involved, pursuing intimacy is worth the effort.

CHANGES IN THE TENTH EDITION

We have updated this edition throughout with the latest available information. First, we have incorporated the latest available research—more than 200 new references from the professional literature. Second, we have utilized the most recent government data. The new references and government data, in addition to updating our knowledge about intimate relationships, provide increasingly more information on racial and ethnic differences in those relationships. This information, integrated throughout the chapters as appropriate, shows how Americans of various racial and ethnic backgrounds have similar as well as dissimilar experiences in their family relationships.

In addition to updating every chapter's research base and statistical data, we have made a number of other

enhancements to the text's coverage. Here is a sampling of topics for which there is updated and/or expanded information:

- The value people place on marriage (Chapter 1)
- Unique aspects of Asian-American family life (Chapter 2)
- Issues for same-sex parents (Chapter 2)
- The issue of division of labor in the home (Chapter 3)
- The issue of unwanted sex (Chapter 5)
- The challenges of cohabitation (Chapter 7)
- Why finding a mate is problematic (Chapter 7)
- The problems of dual-income partners (Chapter 11)
- Sources of parenting stress (Chapter 12)
- The odds of getting a divorce (Chapter 14)

LEARNING AIDS

The World Wide Web is a tool that can enrich our understanding of marriages and families around the world. The tenth edition takes full advantage of online resources with updated *On the Web* exercises at the end of every chapter.

We retained many other important pedagogical aids from previous editions–learning objectives, chapter overviews, and end-of-chapter summaries. Finally, we included four unique tools to promote active learning and critical thinking:

- "Personal" inserts feature an actual experience that was shared with the authors. We changed the names, but the people and the circumstances are real. The "Personal" inserts illustrate some principle or principles in the chapters. They should help you to grasp the principles more fully by seeing them at work in a real situation. The "Personal" inserts could also form the basis for interesting class discussions and analysis.
- "Comparison" inserts examine some topic in each chapter in terms of what happens in other societies. Our understanding is incomplete as long as we know only about our own society. The materials range from how certain Eskimo children learn to be male and female to how the Japanese divorce. These cross-cultural data reveal both similarities and differences with current American practices. Seeing the similarities makes us feel less alone, more a part of all humankind. Seeing the differences helps us become more tolerant and more appreciative of the rich diversity of humans.
- "Principles for Enhancing Intimacy" inserts draw on the materials in each chapter to create practical courses of action students can take to make their own intimate relationships more meaningful and more fulfilling. The principles turn academic knowledge into practical tools for intimate relationships. As a result, students will gain not only understanding but also the skills necessary for constructing a rich life of intimacy.
- Finally, the "What Do You Think?" inserts present you with the arguments made on each side of a series of controversial issues. We make no effort to resolve the issues or to give you our own position. The issues reflect value differences as well as disagreement about interpretation of data. As you reflect on the various controversies, think about the arguments on both sides. Which ones seem to you to be most persuasive? Can you think of additional arguments? Can you understand the thinking of the side with which you disagree? Did seeing both sides of the issues help clarify your own position? These inserts should help you understand the complexity of many issues as well. Hopefully, they will also help you respect the position of those with whom you disagree as you recognize that both sides have thoughtful points to make.

SUPPLEMENTS

As a full-service publisher of quality educational products, McGraw Hill does much more than just sell textbooks. The company creates and publishes an extensive array of print and digital supplements for students and instructors. This edition of *Marriage and Family* is accompanied by a robust supplements package.

The tenth edition of *Marriage and Family* is now available online with Connect, McGraw Hill Education's integrated assignment and assessment platform. Connect also offers SmartBook® 2.0 for the new edition, which is the first adaptive reading experience proven to improve grades and help students study more effectively. All of the title's ancillary content is available through Connect, including:

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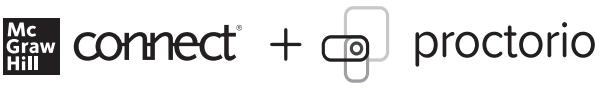

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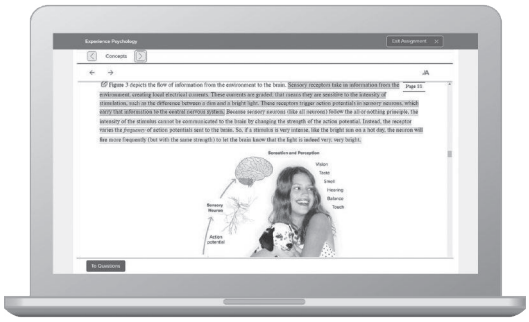

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- Jordan Cunningham,
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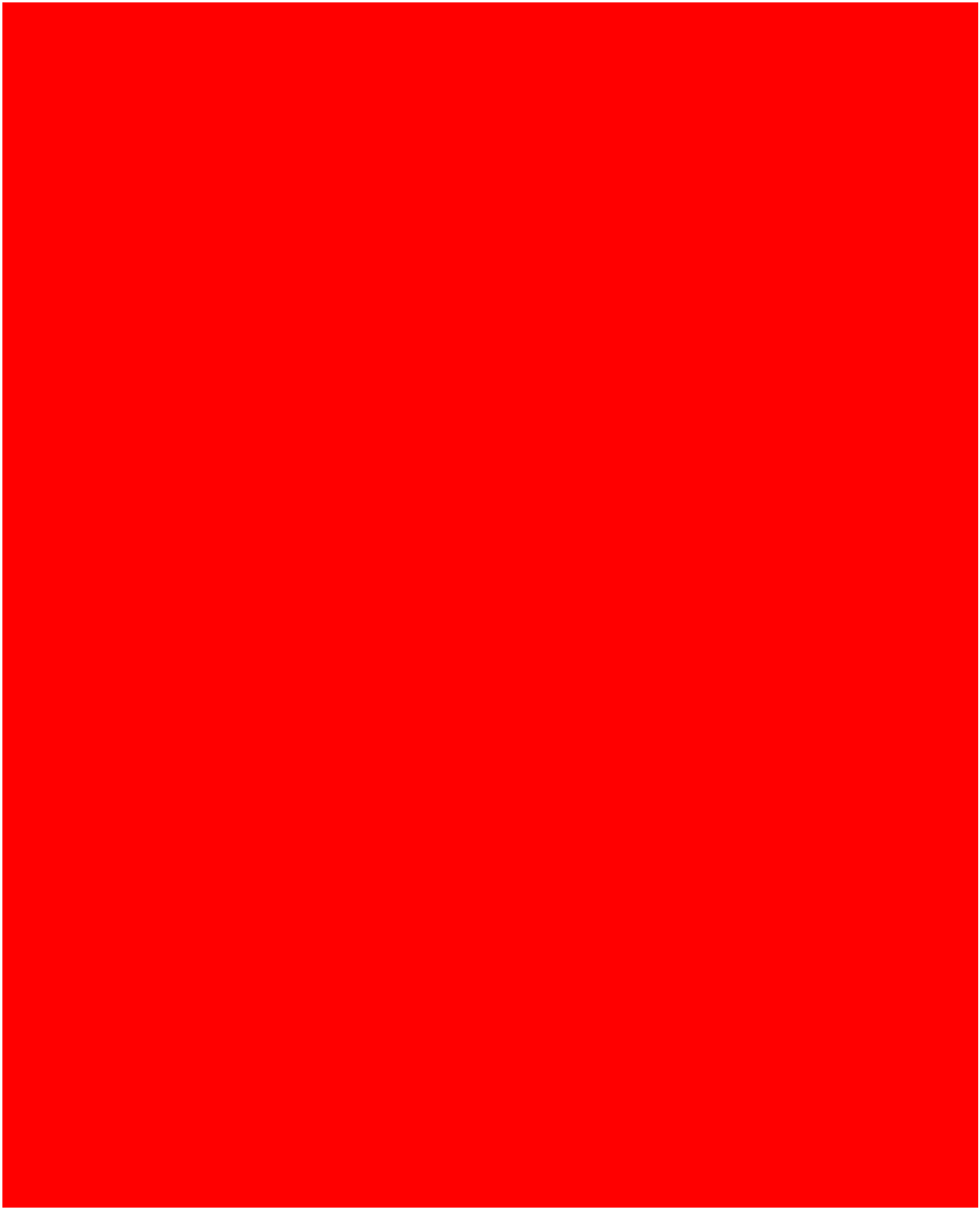
part one

~ The Context of Intimacy ~

Imagine that you have been on a date and your date asks if you had a good time. You not only have had a good time, but you also want to pursue the relationship, so you nod, smile, and suggest a good-night kiss. In most cases, the kiss would be an encouragement. But if your date happened to arrive here recently from any of a number of preindustrial societies, the offer of a kiss might be viewed as strange, unhealthy, or even disgusting.

Our quest for intimacy occurs in particular social contexts. We must understand the context in order to establish meaningful relationships. In part one, we examine the context of intimacy in our society. What is happening in the realm of intimate relationships? What effects does our multicultural society have on such relationships? How do sex roles and sexuality bear upon the quest for intimacy? The answers to these questions are crucial for both understanding and pursuing meaningful intimate relationships.



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~ Marriage and Family in America ~

Needs, Myths, and Dreams

Learning Objectives

After reading and studying chapter 1, you should be able to

1. Explain what is meant by the statement, "we are social creatures."
2. Discuss the need for, and meaning of, intimacy.
3. Recognize and evaluate myths about family life.
4. Describe the changing patterns of intimate relationships in contemporary society.
5. Identify what Americans want in family life in light of the conflicting evidence.
6. Discuss the factors that explain long-term, satisfying marriages.
7. Briefly outline some of the theories used to research and understand family life.

Although most Americans agree that the family is a highly important part of their personal lives and well-being, many know little about their extended families. One of the ways we get a better sense of who we are is to know more about the kind of family of which we are a part. In this exercise, therefore, get to know your extended family better. Inquire about members of the family that you both know and don't know—whether grandparents, cousins, or whatever—and try to get pictures of those people. Ask questions of family members to whom you have access: "Who is or was the most colorful member of this family in your estimation? What is one of the most interesting stories that you know about our family? What did your parents tell you about their parents or other members of the family?"

Summarize your experience by answering the following questions: What have you learned about your family that you didn't know before? How does that make you feel? What difference does it make in the way you think about yourself?

If the entire class engages in this project, share some of the more colorful stories with each other and discuss as a group both the benefits and the pitfalls of discovering more about our families.

Think about a time when you were in love. How would you describe the feeling of being in love? Or think about a time when you had a particularly joyous experience with your family. How would you describe the feelings associated with this positive family experience? As you reflect on these occasions, you may reexperience something of the vibrant emotional high you felt at the time. And you may realize something that social scientists repeatedly find in their research; namely, that close, personal relationships are crucial to your well-being (Myers 2004; Corrigan and Phelan 2004; Kaplan and Kronick 2006). In other words, you have a basic need for **intimacy,** which involves love, affection, caring, and deep attachment to a friend, lover, spouse, or relative. Because such close, vital connections are crucial to a fulfilling life, the major theme of this book is understanding and enhancing the quality of intimate relationships.

Achieving well-being through intimate relationships is, however, neither a simple nor an inevitable process. Your first experience of intimacy occurs in the family into which you were born—your **family of origin.** If that family breaks up because of divorce or death, your intimacy occurs in a single-parent family, and eventually you may live in a stepfamily. You may go through various other changes, including your own marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Thus, you could experience numerous different family situations as you pursue your quest for intimacy. One couple told us that while they were growing up, they had nine different fathers between them. Clearly, different people have differing experiences of family life.

In subsequent chapters, you will encounter the theme of intimacy in marriage and family life again and again as we discuss various issues, showing how such matters as gender roles, dating, communication, and parenting affect your experience of intimacy. We make it all very concrete and practical by ending each chapter with "Principles for Enhancing Intimacy," which illustrate how you can use the chapter's materials to maximize the quality of your own intimate relationships. We also personalize the materials with examples from our research and work with couples as well as the "Personal" boxes that offer a longer account of some topic. Three other features in each chapter reflect our belief in the importance of challenging you to think and of giving you opportunities to participate in the learning process: The "What Do You Think" box presents two different ways of thinking about an issue and asks you to weigh in on the debate; the "Comparison" box gives you an opportunity to reflect on the beliefs and behavior about intimate relationships in other societies and cultures; and the vignettes at the beginning of the chapters suggest activities and projects that enable you and the class to engage in your own research.

In this chapter, we lay the foundation of our quest for fulfilling intimate relationships by exploring the need for intimacy and the myths and dreams about intimate relationships in our society. We examine the trends occurring in marriage and family life as well as the debate about the future of marriage. We point out the strengths and benefits of marriage and family, and, finally, discuss the prospects for those who want a lasting and satisfying marriage and family life.

THE NEED FOR INTIMACY: WE ARE SOCIAL CREATURES

Earlier, we asked you to think about a time when you were in love or when you had a joyous experience with your family. Now try something else. Think of a time when you were in the midst of a group of strangers, or a time when you felt acutely lonely. Can you imagine what it would be like if your entire life were like that, if you never had any experiences of intimacy? Clearly, intimacy is a need, not an option. And it is a need because you, like all other people, are a social creature. There are many ways to illustrate the fact that humans are social creatures. For our purposes, two contrary aspects of human life make the point: the experiences of loneliness and of gaining well-being through intimate relationships.

Loneliness

The experience of **loneliness,** the feeling of being isolated from desired relationships, dramatizes the fact that we are social creatures. Everyone feels lonely at some time. For some people, however, loneliness is a serious problem.

The Meaning of Loneliness. Social scientists distinguish between **social loneliness** and **emotional loneliness** (Van Baarsen et al. 2001). Social loneliness means you have less interpersonal interaction than you desire. Emotional loneliness means you have fewer intimate relationships than you desire. Emotional loneliness can result from a lack of romantic intimacy or family intimacy or both.

It is important to keep in mind that loneliness is not the same as aloneness. Most people prefer and benefit from a certain amount of solitude (Rokach 2001). At the same time, we also want and require relationships that fulfill our intimacy needs. But it isn't enough to interact with people, even a lot of people. That may cure social loneliness, but it doesn't necessarily address emotional loneliness. For example, a young woman who complained of loneliness pointed out that she was part of a

large family but "everyone is busy." And at her work she had some friends that she saw socially on occasions, but "I can't say that I feel really close to any of them." Being around the same people on a regular basis is not equivalent to having intimate relationships with those people.

The Sources of Loneliness. Some people are lonely for temporary periods because of such things as the breakup of a relationship, a move to a new location, or an accident or illness that confines them to home. More persistent loneliness may be rooted in certain social and individual factors.

As far as social factors are concerned, loneliness may reflect a failure of **integration** (Russo 2018). That is, the individual may not feel that he or she is a meaningful and significant part of any group. Such a situation, Émile Durkheim (1933) argued in a classic study, is inherent in modern society. In more primitive societies, he asserted, people are alike in their ideas, values, and aspirations. The entire society is like a close-knit family. But as the population grows and the society becomes more complex, the familial nature inevitably breaks down. Differences between people grow. The society becomes heterogeneous. Society is no longer an integrated whole, but a conglomeration of diverse individuals. People still need to be an integral part of some group or groups, but it is more difficult to do so.

Studies support Durkheim's observations. For example, Putnam (2001) presented evidence that Americans are involved in fewer social activities of all kinds, from Sunday picnics with friends to participation in organizations like the PTA and the League of Women Voters. Putnam claims that community ties have eroded, leading to less trust, less collective caring for each other, and more isolation. Another study showed, as did Durkheim's data, that suicidal behavior is more prevalent among the depressed when they have no religious affiliation (Dervic et al. 2004).

With regard to individual factors, childhood characteristics and experiences may be involved in loneliness. Low self-esteem of adolescents is associated with loneliness and the loneliness may continue into adulthood (Kelly-Novick and Novick 2015). Those who had a parent die when they were children, or who lacked warm and supporting parents while growing up, are more likely to suffer from chronic loneliness as adults (Johnson, LaVoie, and Mahoney 2001). In the later stages of life, loneliness is associated with such things as loss of intimate relationships, financial stress, and health problems that limit activity (Luhmann and Hawkley 2016). Whatever the source or sources, however, loneliness is a serious problem because the consequences are serious for people's quality of life.

The Consequences of Loneliness. Persistent loneliness results in various negative consequences. Lonely people report higher rates of physical and emotional health problems, and they are at greater risk of early death than the nonlonely (Hawkley et al. 2003; Pressman et al. 2005; Lim et al. 2016; Valtorta et al. 2016; Russo 2018). Common problems of the lonely include depression, difficulty in controlling their moods and their thinking patterns, a proneness to addictive behaviors, low energy, and feelings of fatigue (Adams, Sanders, and Auth 2004; Cacioppo and Patrick 2008; Hawkley, Preacher, and Cacioppo 2010). A study of university freshmen reported that those with high levels of loneliness also had higher levels of psychological stress and negative emotions, poorer quality of sleep, and lower levels of antibody response to influenza immunization (Pressman et al. 2005).

If the loneliness is severe, the depression may also be severe and may be associated with suicidal thoughts and behavior (Stickley and Koyanagi 2016). Moreover, the lonely individual can get caught in a vicious, downward

Loneliness is emotionally debilitating.
David Toase/Getty Images

cycle as depression leads the person to isolate himself or herself from others, which deepens the depression and intensifies the isolation.

Well-Being and Intimacy

Another aspect of life that demonstrates the fact that humans are social creatures is the way in which well-being is tied up with intimate relationships (Whitton and Kuryluk 2012). A psychotherapist who works with severely mentally disturbed patients in a private hospital told us that she can "mark the beginning of health and recovery in a patient from the time he or she commits to interacting with others." She noted that when patients first arrive, they avoid contact with others and refuse to interact in group therapy settings. Disturbed people are unable to relate intimately or even casually to others. Lonely people relate casually but have few or no intimate relationships. Healthy, fulfilled people operate from a base of intimacy.

Because well-being is tied up with intimate relationships, as Carolyn Cutrona (2004:992) put it, the "drive to establish connection and intimacy with another person is powerful" and universal—all people in all societies are driven to make intimate connections with others. To be sure, not every intimate connection is an unfailing or continuous source of well-being, as anyone who has experienced an abusive relationship or a troubled relationship or one that breaks up will attest. Such a relationship poses a quandary for the individuals involved. On the one hand, those who divorce or separate are likely to experience a decline in their emotional and physical well-being (Waite, Luo, and Lewin 2008; Hughes and Waite 2009). On the other hand, those who remain in a highly troubled relationship suffer various kinds of emotional and physical health problems (Hawkins and Booth 2005; Umberson et al. 2006; Whisman and Uebelacker 2006). Nevertheless, there is an abundance of evidence that links intimate marital and family relationships with well-being.

The link between the individual's well-being and his or her intimate relationships exists from birth. The quality of the relationship with the parents exerts crucial influence on the infant's healthy development. During childhood, feeling close to mother and to teachers and having friendships are associated with higher levels of self-esteem and with greater emotional strength in adulthood (Burnett and Demnar 1996; Sebanc et al. 2007).

The need for intimacy continues into adulthood. College students who are in committed relationships have fewer mental health problems and are less likely to be overweight or obese (Braithwaite, Delevi, and Fincham 2010). And the more committed the relationship, the higher is a person's well-being. Thus, studies show that the highest level of well-being occurs in those who are married (Dush and Amato 2005; Soons and Liefbroer 2008). Successively lower levels are found among those who cohabit, who are in a steady dating relationship, who have casual dating relations, and, at the lowest level, who date infrequently or not at all. Moreover, satisfying intimate relationships are critical for crisis situations as well as for day-to-day living. Adults who face some kind of crisis in their lives deal with them much better if they have the social support of intimate relationships (Bosworth et al. 2000; Viscoli et al. 2001). We shall give additional evidence later in this chapter when we note the health benefits of marriage.

MYTHS ABOUT FAMILY LIFE

It is important not only to be aware of the importance of the intimate relationships experienced in marriage and family, but also to understand the realities of family life. So how much do you know about American families? And, more importantly, *how* do you know what you know? We raise such questions because Americans "know" a certain number of things about family life that are myths rather than facts.

Where do our notions about the family come from? One way we get information is through experience. We know of our own experience and that of our friends and relatives. Another important source of information is the mass media. Consider, for instance, the family life portrayed on television. If you were a foreigner and the only thing you knew about American families came from television programs, how would you describe a typical family?

For example, if you watch any soap operas (if not, ask someone who does), think about the family life portrayed. How would you characterize it? How stable are the relationships? How much conflict occurs? How many celebrations or gratifying experiences are there? How much of what is portrayed is an accurate reflection of your experiences in your family or of other families with whom you are familiar?

Such programs are likely to generate a certain amount of misunderstanding about the nature of family life. The combination of misleading information in the mass media, misinterpretations of correct information, and inferences made from our own limited experiences creates and leads to the acceptance of various myths. We use **myth** here in the sense of one of its dictionary meanings—a belief about something that is accepted uncritically. Myths usually contain at least a germ of truth but are accepted without question by many people

as the whole truth. Because myths help shape our perceptions, expectations, and hopes, they are important and must be considered carefully. Let us look at a few of those concerning marriage and the family.

We've Lost the Extended Family

The **extended family** refers to a group of three or more generations formed as an outgrowth of the parent–child relationship. Grandparents, parents, and children together comprise an extended family. Was that a typical family arrangement earlier in U.S. history? Many people think so. But mounting evidence indicates that three generations gathered around a common hearth is a romanticization of the past. It seems that both in America and elsewhere, the **nuclear family** (husband, wife, and any children) has been the most common arrangement since at least the sixteenth century (Laslett 1977; Brooks 2020).

There are a number of reasons the extended family has not been common. First, life expectancy in the past was much lower. Infectious diseases claimed the lives of many individuals before they were old enough to be grandparents. Second, children tended to leave home when they married. Like young people today, they preferred to establish their own homes, rather than to live with their parents.

However, while extended family households are not in the majority, since 1980 there has been a reversal of the trend toward smaller rates of multigenerational family households (Fry and Passel 2014). The proportion of Americans living in a multigenerational household dropped from 24.7 percent in 1940 to 12.1 percent in 1980, then rose again to 18.3 percent in 2016 (U.S. Census Bureau website).

Opposites Attract

We'll explore this myth in detail in chapter 7. The bottom line, however, is that you are very unlikely to be attracted to someone who is your "opposite." The more alike you are with someone in terms of your social background, your lifestyle, your values, and so forth, the more likely you are to be attracted to that person. More importantly, the more alike you are, the better your chances of having a lasting and satisfying relationship.

Of course, sometimes people who are unlike each other do get romantically involved and marry. Such marriages have a lower probability of being both lasting and satisfying (National Marriage Project 2004). The differences that seemed attractive at the beginning of a relationship may become irritations, frustrations, and sources of conflict in day-to-day living in marriage.

People Marry Because They Love Each Other

Why did you, or will you, get married? Your answer probably includes, or will include, the fact of being in love. But love, as we will see in chapter 6, is a complex emotion. It is difficult to define. And the feeling we call *love* might really be something different or at least involve some other emotions. As Lederer and Jackson (1968:42) point out, we all like to think that we marry for love, "but by and large the emotion [we] interpret as love is in reality some other emotion—often a strong sex drive, fear, or a hunger for approval."

Lederer (a writer) and Jackson (a therapist) go on to point out that we generally lose all judgment during courtship. We are driven by an "ecstatic paralysis" to mate with someone and reproduce ourselves. We may also wed because parents and other important people expect us to marry, because we are lonely, because we want economic security, or for various other reasons.

It is not that love is absent when people are considering marriage, but it is a mistake to believe that love is

Love is one, but not the only, reason people marry.
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the only or even the dominant reason that people marry (Razdan 2003). Love may be the outgrowth as well as the foundation of a good marriage, but many other factors and feelings are involved when we are wrestling with the decision of whether to marry.

Having Children Increases Marital Satisfaction

"Just Molly and me and baby makes three," goes an old song. The outcome is a kind of personal "heaven." Most married people plan on having children, and most expect that those children will enrich their lives. But whatever the effect of children on people's lives as a whole, they clearly do not always increase satisfaction with the marital relationship.

Most studies show that marital satisfaction decreases for one or both spouses during the child-rearing years (Twenge, Campbell, and Foster 2003). The demands of raising children are such that parents often do not have the time or energy for cultivating their own relationship. Children frequently add financial strains. They require a great deal of energy. They may leave one or both parents exhausted and short-tempered. When children eventually grow up and leave home, the parents may find their marital satisfaction increasing again as they enter into a kind of second honeymoon.

This is not to say that children inevitably detract from the quality of one's life or marriage. It is important to keep in mind that *decreased* satisfaction is not the same as *dis*satisfaction. Furthermore, many couples report stable and some even report increased marital satisfaction after they have children (Shapiro, Gottman, and Carrere 2000; Pollmann-Schult 2014). The impact of children seems to depend on the quality of the marriage: a good marriage enhances the benefits and reduces the liabilities of children. If the marriage deteriorates with the addition of children, the couple probably already had a troubled relationship.

A Good Sex Life Is the Best Predictor of Marital Satisfaction

Tom, a counselor in a university, married when he was 29. When we talked with him before the wedding, he seemed somewhat ambivalent. He was already having some problems with his fiancée about money and in-laws. He shared very few interests with her. "Why," we asked, "are you marrying her?" "We have a great sex life," he replied. "We're terrific in bed together." One year later, Tom divorced his wife. "Great sex" was not enough to save the marriage.

What about marriages that start off better than Tom's, those in which the couples have shared values, interests, and goals? Is sex the best predictor of satisfaction? Again, the answer is no. The way you communicate with your spouse, the way you solve problems, and the way in which you spend your leisure time are all more important than sex. Sexual compatibility and sexual fulfillment are important and desirable, but they are not even essential to a meaningful and satisfying marriage. In a survey of 300 couples who had long-term (15 years or more), satisfying marriages, we found that agreement about sex was not among the top 10 reasons people gave for the quality of their marriages (Lauer and Lauer 1986:179–80). One woman who said she was "extremely happy" with her marriage reported very little sexual activity over the past 10 years. This was her second marriage. Her first had been "totally sex and little else." Her second husband's health problems contributed to the decline in sexual activity. "So I suppose a kind of trade-off exists here," she said. "I like absolutely everything else about my current marriage."

In other words, you can have a great sex life and an unhappy marriage. You can even have an unfulfilling sex life and a happy marriage. And, as we shall see in chapter 4, some people have both a fulfilling sex life and a happy marriage. But it isn't the sex that is the most important reason for their marital satisfaction.

Having said this, however, it is important to note one thing more: married sex is more satisfying both emotionally and physically than is sex between the unmarried (National Marriage Project 2004). Contrary to the notion of the "swinging single" life that is filled with exciting sexual adventures, you are more likely to find sexual fulfillment in marriage than in either being single or cohabiting.

Happily Married People Don't Have Conflict

A young wife told us that in the early months of her marriage she was devastated each time she and her husband would argue. "I had assumed," she admitted, "that if you had a good marriage there would be no reason to fight. So every time we had an argument, I was afraid that our marriage was doomed." Eventually, she came to realize something that we will discuss in detail in chapter 10: not only is conflict normal, but when it is handled properly, it strengthens rather than threatens the marriage (Driver and Gottman 2004).

"Happily ever after," then, does *not* mean "with never a difference or disagreement." In fact, a little reflection shows how unrealistic it is to expect a conflict-free union. Any sustained, close relationship has times of strain, disagreement, and argument. Parents fight with their children. Close friends disagree and are hurt by each other. People who work closely together on a daily basis find themselves getting frustrated and angry. Why should you expect anything different in marriage?

Of course, the amount of disagreement will vary. But it is highly unlikely that any long-term, close relationship can totally avoid conflict. In fact, conflict theorists go further and assert that conflict can facilitate creative solutions and increase solidarity over the long run. Studies of long-term marriages confirm the positive contribution that effective conflict resolution makes to a union (Lauer and Lauer 1986; Alford-Cooper 1998; Seal, Doherty, and Harris 2016).

Half of All Marriages End in Divorce

In the past, more marriages ended because of the death of a spouse than because of divorce. Now the opposite is true. But just how many marriages actually end in divorce? Millions of Americans, including many professionals, assert that half of all marriages will fail. The statistic causes many people anxiety as they contemplate marriage. Ironically, the statistic isn't true.

It is true that the divorce rate is quite high and that there has been about one divorce for every two marriages in the United States in recent decades. But such rates do not mean a 50 percent failure rate. Actually, the failure rate is very difficult to calculate. To illustrate the problems, let's say that 2 million couples are married in a particular year and 1 million divorce. There are 55 million other couples who remain married from previous years. And there are millions of people who are single because they divorced in previous years. How does one calculate the failure rate?

The point is, predicting failure rates is very complex. Among other things, divorce rates vary considerably among generations and among people in the same generation from differing social backgrounds. With regard to generational differences, rates were quite low until the dramatic rise in the 1960s. But since 1982, divorce rates have tended to decline again. The rate is now lower than it has been since the early 1970s. Had the rates of the early 1980s continued, half or more of all marriages would indeed fail (National Marriage Project 2003:25).

With regard to differing social backgrounds, the lower your education and income, the higher your chances are of divorce. Rates also vary among religious groups. Catholics are far less likely than Protestants to divorce. And a national survey showed that the proportion ever divorced varied from 44 percent of Pentecostals to 28 percent of Presbyterians (Barna Group 2004). As a group, Pentecostals are lower in education and income than Presbyterians, so we can't be sure to what extent such differences reflect the religion itself or the socioeconomic status of the two groups. At any rate, in the national survey, which was a representative sample of the U.S. population, 35 percent of those ever married also had been divorced. It is not true that half of all marriages fail, and if the declining rates continue, the proportion of those divorced will be far less than 50 percent.

Taking all such factors into account, what are your chances? If marriage and divorce rates remained at the same level indefinitely, it would be easy to answer the question. All we can say at this point is that, if you marry now or in the near future, your chances of a lasting marriage (i.e., until one of you dies) are better than even. Furthermore, if you have a fairly good education (some college or more) and a good income, come from an intact family, have a religious affiliation, and marry after age 25 without having a baby before marrying, "your chances of divorce are very low indeed" (National Marriage Project 2012:75).

The Dangers of Myths

There are more myths than those we have discussed. The important point is to recognize that many of the common beliefs about marriage and family living are wrong. Do not take for granted the truth of something simply because a lot of people agree that it is true. Myths are more than simple mistakes. Accepting myths can detract from the quality of your life.

Consider, for example, the myth that people marry only because they are in love. Americans like to think that arranged marriages and marriages of convenience belong to an earlier era or to a less modernized culture and that love is the sole reason people wed today. Yet even in contemporary U.S. society, as we shall see in chapter 7, individuals choose a mate for a variety of factors and not just because they are deeply in love. And even when they marry because of feelings of love, they often find that the feelings are fleeting and question whether they were ever "in love" in the first place.

The experience of Bart, a 30-year-old businessman who married when he was 23, illustrates this point well. At the time of his wedding, he believed he was "madly in love." But four years later, the "feeling of love" no longer existed. Bart had an affair. His wife found out about it and divorced him. Bart was so upset over the divorce that

he went into therapy. There he discovered that his feeling of being "madly in love" was a mix of many different emotions and really wasn't love at all. And he learned that he had gone into the union with very unrealistic expectations about the nature of love and marriage. Like many people, he was certain that being "madly in love" would last a lifetime and didn't realize that these initial feelings needed to be nourished and eventually replaced by something more substantial. Bart has not remarried. He deeply regrets the mistakes he made and fears another relationship. He is somewhat bitter about the myth that led him to this point: "I think I have a better sense of what love means now. I wish someone had drilled that into me 10 years ago."

Myths can ruin a good relationship. They blind us to the realities of intimacy. They give us false expectations about the nature of marriage and family life. As such, they are impediments in our quest for well-being.

CHANGING PATTERNS OF INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

How do you achieve intimacy before you are married? What does it mean to be a husband or wife? What does it mean to be a parent? When are you likely to get married? How many, if any, children will you probably have? The answers to such questions vary, depending on when they are asked. Social life, including patterns of intimacy, is dynamic. Young people in their 20s today, for example, may not have yet contemplated marriage at an age when their parents already had two or three children. In this section, we will look at some of the important changes that have been occurring in intimate relationships in recent years. As you come to understand the dynamic nature of intimate living, you will develop the realistic grounding necessary to enhance the quality of your own life.

Premarital Sex

There has always been premarital sex. Records indicate that even some of our Puritan forebears were pregnant when they were joined in marriage (Demos 1968). But the approval of, and proportion of those engaging in premarital sex, increased considerably during the 1960s and 1970s. By the late 1980s, the proportion began to decline. Still, a recent national survey reported that 39.5 percent (compared to 54 percent in 1991) of high-school teenagers have had sexual intercourse, mostly heterosexual but some homosexual also (Kann 2018). The proportion varied by age and by gender: older teenagers were more likely to have sexual relations than younger ones, and males were more likely than females. By the 12th grade, 57.3 percent reported having had sexual intercourse.

Births to Unmarried Women

The rate of nonmarital births has increased dramatically. Among women born between 1925 and 1929, almost 1 in 10 had at least one nonmarital birth by age 30; among women born between 1965 and 1969, more than 1 of 4 had at least one nomarital birth by age 30 (Wu 2008). Table 1.1 shows the increase in the number and proportion of nonmarital births since 1960. By 2017, 39.8 percent of all births were to unmarried women (Martin et al. 2018). The rates vary considerably by racial/ethnic background, with Asian mothers having the lowest rate and Black mothers having the highest.

Living Alone

Increasing numbers of people are living alone. In 2020, 36.2 million Americans lived alone (figure 1.1). More women than men live alone, and African Americans are more likely than those of other racial/ethnic groups to live alone. People live alone because they are widowed, divorced, separated, or never married. Some of them will eventually marry. Others will opt—willingly or unwillingly—to remain single.

Living alone poses serious questions about fulfilling one's intimate needs. Of course, living with someone doesn't necessarily mean that those needs *are* fulfilled. The point is, rather, that just because a person lives

TABLE 1.1 Births to Unmarried Women, by Race and Hispanic Origin, 1960–2017

Race	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2017
Number (1,000)						
White*	82	175	320	556	524	566
Black**	142	224	346	456	425	389
Asian						29
Hispanic				218	347	468
Births as a Percent of All Births in Racial Group						
White*	2.3	5.7	11.0	16.9	22.1	28.4
Black**	21.6	34.9	48.4	66.7	68.5	69.4
Asian						11.8
Hispanic				36.7	42.5	52.1

*Prior to 2000, "white" includes white Hispanic.
**Figures for 1960, 1970, and 1980 are for Blacks and other races.
Sources: U.S. Census Bureau website; Martin et al. 2018.

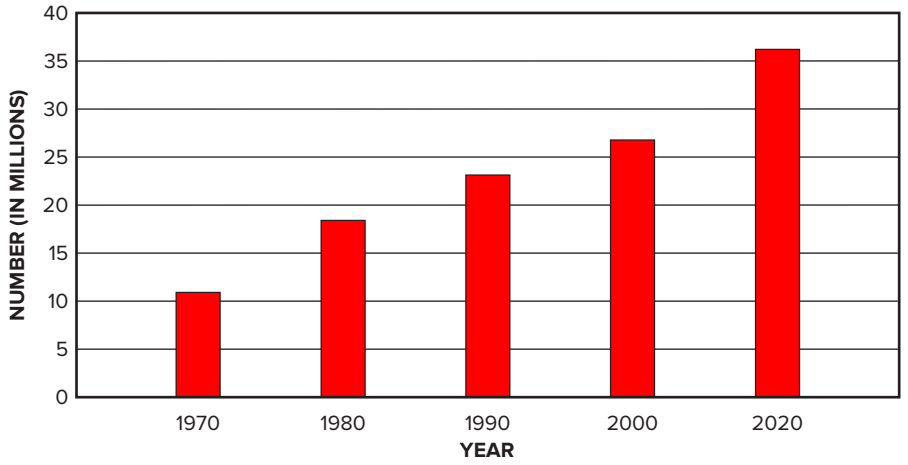


FIGURE 1.1 Number of Americans Living Alone
Source: U.S. Census Bureau website.

alone does not mean that he or she can exist without intimate relationships. Rather, it means that the individual must find alternative means of fulfilling his or her needs.

Cohabitation

One way that some people fulfill their intimacy needs without getting married is through **cohabitation,** living with someone in an intimate, sexual relationship without being legally married. By 2020, according to the Census Bureau, there were 8.81 million opposite-sex, and more than 469,000 same-sex, unmarried couples living together. This represents a dramatic increase over the 430,000 reported in 1960. The majority of unmarried couples living together are younger than 40 years of age, and a substantial proportion of them have children under the age of 18 living with them.

Some of those who cohabit will eventually marry. Many of those who opt for cohabitation think it is a way to test their compatibility for marriage, thus beating the odds on the high divorce rate. This is another of the myths that prevail today. We shall see why in chapter 7.

Delayed Marriage

Between 1950 and 1970, half of the females who married did so by the time they were 20.5 years old, and half of the males who married did so by the time they were 22.5 years old. In the 1970s, the median age at which people married (i.e., the age by which half were married) began to increase. By 2020, according to the Census Bureau, the median age for the first marriage was 30.5 for men and 28.1 for women. The figure for women is the highest ever officially recorded in the United States (statistics for this have been kept since 1890).

Most people will eventually marry, but many are delaying marriage. Those most likely to marry early (before the age of 23) tend to come from families that are disadvantaged or that have a strong conservative Protestant or Mormon affiliation, have relatively low educational expectations, and cohabit before they marry (Uecker and Stokes 2008). Other factors that may delay marriage include the availability of sexual relations among singles, the emphasis on personal growth and freedom, the unwillingness to "settle down" before one has many experiences, and fears about commitment and the high divorce rate.

Birth Rates

An increasing number of women are delaying having their first child until their mid- or even late 30s. This means that they will likely have fewer children. Moreover, because the capacity for getting pregnant tends to decrease with age, some women are involuntarily childless. Others choose to remain childless (see chapter 12). They do not view children as necessary to a fulfilling life.

As a result of later marriages, delayed first births, and an increasing number of childless marriages, the **birth rate** declined considerably from the 1950s, though it leveled off after 1995 (figure 1.2). In 2017, the rate was

Comparison

Asian Women Are Marrying at a Later Age

Delaying marriage until a later age is not unique to women in the United States. In many Asian countries, where women have typically married during or even before adolescence, average age at marriage has been increasing (Jones 2013). Since the mid-1990s, the proportion of Japanese women who have never married has risen from 40 to 54 percent in those aged 25 to 29 years, and from 14 to 27 percent in those aged 30 to 34 years. In fact, the average age at first marriage for Japanese women has surpassed that of U.S. women. In 2019, the mean age of marriage for Japanese women was 29.6.

While the average age at first marriage in many other Asian countries is still lower than that in the United States, it has tended to be on the rise throughout Asia. For example, among those aged 30 to 34 years, the proportion who have never married increased from 1960 to 2000 from 11.6 percent to 14.8 percent in the Philippines, from 6.7 to 16.1 percent in Thailand, from 2.1 percent to over 11 percent in Taiwan, and from 0.5 percent to 10.7 percent in the Republic of Korea.

In some countries, there is an interval between the wedding ceremony and the time when a couple begins living together and consummates their marriage through sexual intercourse. In Nepal, for instance, the union is generally not consummated during the first year of marriage. During this time, the young bride is trained to be an accomplished, subservient housewife before she moves in with her in-laws. In other words, she spends a year learning how to make the transition from being a daughter to being a wife and a daughter-in-law.

What differentiates those women who marry earlier from those who marry later? Generally, women with higher levels of education tend to marry at a later age. A study of highly educated Japanese women found that they refuse to marry a sexist man or a man who has less income and/or education than they have. Work also enters into a woman's decision. Women who work in nonagricultural jobs tend to marry later than those engaged in agriculture or those who do not work outside the home. Professional women are particularly likely to marry at a later age. Average age at first marriage will no doubt continue to rise, therefore, in Asian countries as the educational and occupational levels of women continue to rise.

Sources: Niraula 1994; Women in Development 1999; Retherford, Ogawa, and Matsukura 2001; Kageyama 2004; Jones 2005; Nemoto 2008; Statista Research Department 2020.

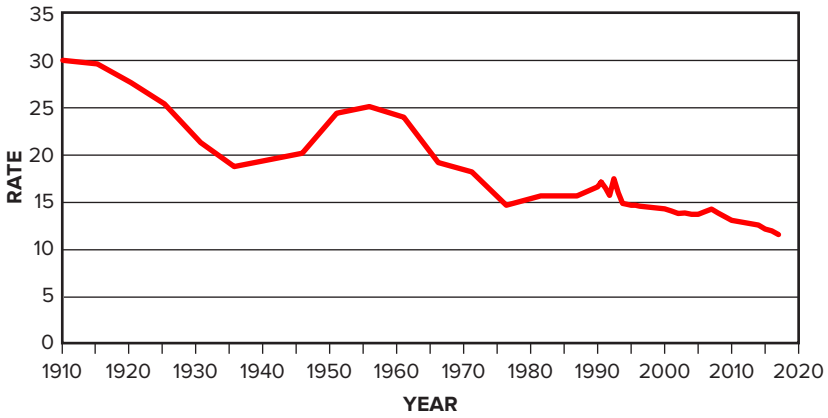


FIGURE 1.2 Birth Rate per 1,000 Population, 1910–2017

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau website; Martin et al. 2018.

11.8 births per 1,000 population, less than half of what it was in 1910. In fact, the rate is now lower than what is necessary for the natural replacement of the population (Bachu and O'Connell 2001). Without immigration, the U.S. population will eventually decline if birth rates remain at the present low level.

Household Size

As would be expected from the increasing number of people living alone and the lower birth rates, the average household size in the country has declined. In 1790, the average household contained 5.8 people. The number reflects not only the tendency to have more children but also may have included boarders, lodgers, and apprentices who lived with the family. By 1960, the average was 3.3 people, and by 2020, according to the Census Bureau, the figure was 2.53. Changes in average household size reflect both declining fertility rates and increasing numbers of nonfamily and single-parent households.

Employed Mothers

Women have been participating in the economy in growing numbers since the 1950s. Census Bureau figures show that 23.8 percent of married women were employed in 1950. By 2018, 71.4 percent of married women with children under 18 and 62 percent of those with children under 3 were in the labor force (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019).

Some mothers are employed out of necessity; their husbands do not earn enough to support the family. Others work outside the home because they want a better lifestyle than they could afford with only one income. And still others define their jobs or careers as important to their own fulfillment. Whatever the reasons, homes with an employed father, a stay-at-home mother, and children are now only a small fraction of all U.S. households.

Divorce

Even though the number of people who divorce is exaggerated in popular belief, it is true that the divorce rate has risen dramatically since 1965. By the mid-1970s, the United States had the highest divorce rate in the Western world. After 1981, divorce rates tended to level off and even decline. Since the late 1980s, the rate has been on a slightly downward trend and is now around the level it was in the early 1970s.

A Concluding Note on Changing Patterns

Clearly, there are both long-term trends and short-term fluctuations in patterns of intimate behavior. Making firm conclusions about the future is, therefore, hazardous. Some experts, for instance, believe that marriage and family patterns will continue to evolve and to diverge from the traditional nuclear family type. They are convinced

Increasing numbers of women leave their children in day care while they work.

Comstock Images/Alamy Stock Photo

Personal

"I Had to Go to Work"

Maria and Luis are a Hispanic couple in their 30s. They married young and now have four children. Maria has become one of the millions of mothers who are now in the workforce. She tells of the struggles that led her to decide to find employment. Contrary to what she had hoped, getting a job outside the home did not immediately resolve the intimacy issues that Maria had been experiencing with her husband and her children.

When Luis and I were married, right after I graduated from high school, we both agreed that I would take care of our home and our children and he would earn our living. That's the way it was in both of our families when we were growing up. Even the priest who married us urged us to accept those roles because it was God's way of ensuring the best for our children.

Well, it worked okay for a number of years. But when the children were all in school and our expenses kept going up, we just couldn't make it on Luis's paycheck. We were getting deeper and deeper in debt. We had to tell our children that we couldn't afford for them to have the same things and do the same things as their friends. How do you tell a teenaged girl that she can't go to her school prom unless she wears one of her old dresses? How do you tell your son that he can't join the competitive soccer league because we can't afford the fee?

And it wasn't just a problem with the kids. We found ourselves getting more and more irritated with each other. I made a big mistake one evening when I told Luis that, if he only had a better job, money wouldn't always be so tight. He got real angry and stalked out of the house. I knew I had hurt him. It wasn't his fault. He was doing the best he could. But I also knew something more. I had to go to work. We were going to have to change our ideas of what an ideal family is like. After all, other mothers I knew were working. Why shouldn't I? In fact, the more I thought about it, the more I was convinced that it would solve all our problems.

So when Luis finally came home, I told him I was sorry for blaming him and that we could fix things if I went to work. Well, he just took that as another slam at him for not bringing home more money than he did. We argued about it for a couple of weeks before he finally came around and agreed that I was only trying to help and that my working was probably the only way for us to solve our money problems.

I thought we were going to fix everything at last. But the only job I could find was in the evenings. That helped our finances, but Luis and the children complained that I wasn't around. I began to feel like a bad wife and mother who had abandoned her family. Then I got a day job. Things are much better now. But we still struggle. I'm tired when I come home and don't feel like cooking and doing housework. Luis and my kids are starting to help more. Even though they complain, it's making a big difference. I really love my family. It's tough. But we're going to get through this.

that we are entering into a new age in which new forms of family are emerging. Others believe that we are on the verge of a conservative trend that will renew the emphasis on traditional patterns. We will make our own position clear when we discuss what people want.

WHAT DO WE WANT? WHAT DO WE NEED?

Social scientists are engaged in an intense debate about what Americans need in the way of marriage and family life. We will look at that debate and then examine the evidence that can help answer the questions.

The Great Debate

The debate is often framed in terms of the liberal versus the conservative view of marriage and the family. The former is exemplified by the Alternatives to Marriage Project, an organization founded in 1998 to advocate "equality and fairness for unmarried people, including people who choose not to marry, cannot marry, or live together before marriage" (Alternatives to Marriage

Project 2002). The organization does not oppose marriage. Rather, it strives to gain equal rights for the unmarried. Those rights would include such things as

- equal support for all families in which children live.
- legal recognition of all types of families, so that all may receive the benefits offered to any.
- legalization of same-sex marriages.
- support of research on unmarried relationships and families in order to identify and address their needs.
- legislation that makes discrimination on the basis of marital status illegal.

Those who advocate such rights argue that all "alternative" forms of the family, including single-parent and same-sex families and cohabiting couples, are as valid and as fulfilling as the heterosexual, married-couple family. And they argue that they are valid and fulfilling for any children involved as well as for the adults.

The conservative position is represented by organizations like the Institute for American Values and The National Marriage Project. Their aims include such things as

- promoting marriage as the best basis for family life.
- strengthening existing marriages.
- reducing the divorce rate.
- discouraging such alternative forms of family life as cohabitation and single-parent families.
- researching the state of marriage and family life in the United States today, including the attitudes of young people.

For example, the Institute for American Values (2002) issued a report on "why marriage matters," based on the work of 13 family scholars. The report summarizes evidence that the benefits of marriage extend to husbands, wives, children, and society as a whole.

In essence, then, one side argues that changes in marriage and the family over the past half-century are to be affirmed and celebrated. The other side argues that the changes pose a serious threat to individual and social well-being. Let's review some of those changes.

Changes in Traditional Arrangements

If we define a traditional family as one that stays intact except for death and is composed of an employed father (the breadwinner), a stay-at-home mother (the homemaker), and children, then it is clear it is now the choice of a minority of Americans. Most people no longer regard that arrangement as practical. Moreover, the woman's movement and women's experience in the labor force have sensitized women to the value of employment outside the home. The experience of nonfamily living, which an increasing number of young Americans who leave the parental home before marrying have, also contributes to a change in the traditional pattern. Independent living—whether because of college or work—exposes people to a greater variety of perspectives and values and can thereby affect their views and plans regarding marriage and family life.

Adding to the evidence of change, Glenn (1987, 1992) analyzed national polls taken between 1969 and 1986 and found a number of ways in which Americans were moving away from the traditional ideal, including having less emphasis on marital permanence as an ideal. Certainly, the data we have given in this chapter support the notion that traditional arrangements are being replaced by new forms of family life. Figure 1.3 shows the dramatic change in household composition from 1980 to 2009. Note the decline of married-couple families, and the increasing proportion of nonfamily households. In the last decade of the twentieth century, the rate of increase of nonfamily households was twice that of family households, and families headed by women with no husband present grew three times as fast as married-couple families (Gibson 2001).

Such trends raise a question about the future of traditional forms of marriage and the family. Will they be a minority of all arrangements in the near future, or will they even die out? Some scholars argue for *marital decline,* while others affirm *marital resilience* (Amato 2004). Those who see continuing decline point out that U.S. culture is increasingly individualistic with an increasingly strong emphasis on personal happiness. Many Americans define a commitment to marriage as the imposition of restraints and obligations that can interfere with the individual's pursuit of happiness. In such a context, marriage is unlikely to last beyond the point where the individual no longer feels happy and fulfilled by the relationship.

In contrast, those who affirm resilience deny the trend toward increasing individualism and the personal obsession with happiness. They argue that we can't really be sure that the proportion of troubled marriages has increased. What has changed is that it is easier to get out of marriage and there is no longer a stigma attached to divorce. Marriages that once would have continued in a state of mutual misery now break up. But the majority of those who divorce will remarry at some point. Even many

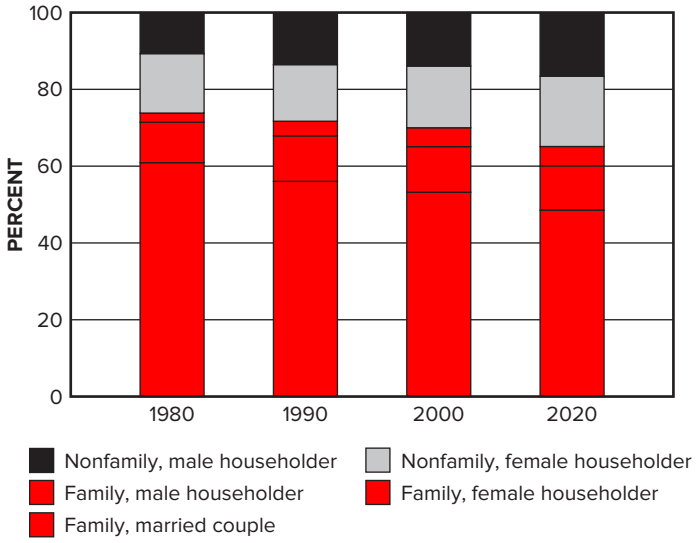


FIGURE 1.3 Household Composition, 1980–2020

Source: U.S. Census Bureau website.

of those who are single parents would like to marry or remarry. In other words, the growing number of singles (never married, divorced, widowed) and single-parent families does not reflect a preferred state in order to pursue happiness, but the problems of finding a suitable mate. Most Americans still regard marriage and family life as an integral part of happiness, not a state that inhibits the individual's quest for happiness. One survey reported that 61 percent of men and women who had never married said that they would like to marry (Cohn 2013). Another survey found that 57 percent of men and 46 percent of women identified having a job or career they enjoy as essential for a fulfilling life (Barroso 2020). But 70 percent of the men and 71 percent of the women also named marriage as either essential or important for their fulfillment.

Given such differing perspectives by the experts and such views about marriage on the part of the citizenry, what can we say about the future of marriage and family life? Cherlin (2004) suggests three possibilities (based on his contention that marriage is not as strongly governed by social expectations as it once was but has become more tied up with individual choice and personal development). One possibility is that marriage will revert to what it was in the past—a social institution governed by strong expectations. As such, present trends would reverse and increasing numbers of people would be in stable marriages and two-parent families. Cherlin doubts this will happen.

A second possibility is that marriage will remain important to people but will not be as dominant as it was in the past. Marriage, Cherlin asserts, still has a high symbolic status in U.S. society because it is a marker of prestige and personal achievement. The third possibility is that marriage will become merely one of many alternative ways of experiencing an intimate relationship. It will be no less nor no more valued than any of the other alternatives. As Cherlin notes, some observers believe the third possibility is already emerging, while others expect the second possibility to hold for the foreseeable future.

Our own position lies somewhere between the first two possibilities articulated by Cherlin. We believe that a renewed emphasis on the value of marriage and family life will occur in the future. **Values** are things that are preferred because people define them as worthy and desirable. We expect, in other words, an increasing proportion of Americans to prefer marriage and family because they will define them as desired states that are worthy of their commitment. For this to happen, Americans must come to terms with the contrary values—what we call "me or we?"—that now exist. They also must recognize the strengths and benefits of marriage and family life, which we will explore. Let's look first at the issue of contrary values.

Me or We?

Americans are caught up in contradictory feelings that derive from contrary values. On the one hand, there is

familism, a value on family living. Familism leads us to cherish our families, to subordinate our personal desires if necessary for the good of the family group, and to view marriage as that which demands our commitment and fidelity.

On the other hand, we are a nation that values individualism, the well-being of the individual. American individualism has two strains, one of which—utilitarian individualism—emphasizes personal achievement and the other of which—expressive individualism—emphasizes personal happiness and fulfillment (Bellah et al. 1985). Utilitarian individualism stresses getting ahead for yourself, while expressive individualism focuses on fulfillment by doing those things that satisfy you.

Expressive individualism has been particularly strong for the past few decades, buttressed by a humanistic psychology that has urged people to search for self-fulfillment above all. There is some evidence that we may be retreating from this strong emphasis on expressive individualism. As we heard one therapist put it, "We've been through the *me* generation and now we're trying to go back to a *we* generation." Americans struggle between "me" and "we." As Bellah et al. (1985:111) point out, our individualistic ideology makes it hard for us to understand why we should even be concerned about giving to each other:

> Now we are all supposed to be conscious primarily of our assertive selves. To reappropriate a language in which we could all, men and women, see that dependence and independence are deeply related, and that we can be independent persons without denying that we need one another, is a task that has only begun.

In sum, we believe that Americans value marriage and family but are struggling between familial and individualistic values. We value and need intimacy, but many are not convinced that marriage and family living are the only ways to fulfill those intimacy needs. Indeed, they are not the only arrangements that will satisfy all people. Thus, we are in process of making a variety of arrangements legitimate. The majority of people, and we believe an increasing majority, will continue to opt for marriage and family living; a minority will find alternative arrangements.

Strengths and Benefits of Marriage and Family

Increasing numbers of studies show the strengths and benefits of marriage and family. As the results of these studies pervade the population, we believe that increasing numbers of people will place a higher value on stable marriages and family life. Clearly, some marriages and some families are more stressful and destructive than beneficial, such that the negative interaction adversely affects health and work satisfaction (Sandberg et al. 2013). But those in satisfying relationships reap many benefits. A large and growing body of research underscores the advantages that the married have over the unmarried. Overall, both married men and married women are happier; have lower rates of alcoholism, suicide, and depression; are physically and emotionally healthier; are less likely to engage in binge drinking or use marijuana; are less sexually frustrated; are better off financially; and live longer than the unmarried (Waite and Gallagher 2000; Simon 2002; Proulx, Helms, and Buehler 2007; LaPierre 2009; Liu 2009; Miller et al. 2013; Carr et al. 2014; Curtin and Tejada-Vera 2018). The reasons for the advantages of marriage are a matter of some debate, but most observers would agree on one point: A satisfying marriage provides you with a built-in support system to help you deal with the varied challenges and struggles of your life (Dehle, Larsen, and Landers 2001).

The benefits of a stable marriage for physical and emotional well-being also have been found in other nations such as Japan, Israel, and Great Britain (Kawakami et al. 1995; Cohen, Geron, and Farchi 2009; University of East Anglia 2016). And a 17-nation study reported that in 16 of the countries (Northern Ireland was the only exception), marriage was significantly related to happiness and that marriage increases happiness equally among men and women (Stack and Eshleman 1998). Clearly, a satisfying marital relationship enhances happiness and is a strong buffer against the negative effects of stress.

The strengths of marriage and family are evident in the high value that people continue to place upon them. Most teenagers regard a good marriage and family life as extremely important (Martin et al. 2003). In a national survey of the values of 14- to 29-year-olds, "having a lifelong partner" and "getting married" received more ratings of "top importance" than did "having sex" (Youthography 2007). Eighty-one percent of females and 76.2 percent of males rated "having a lifelong partner" as of top importance to them, and 67.0 percent of females and 60.9 percent of males gave top ratings to getting married. In contrast, having sex got top ratings from 40.8 percent of the females and 52.3 percent of the males.

People also affirm the importance of marriage and family in other ways. A Pew Research Center (2006) survey reported that family continues to be the greatest source of satisfaction in people's lives. About 73 percent

What Do You Think?

There is disagreement about ***whether the decline of the traditional family (father, stay-at-home mother, and children) will lead to the breakdown of U.S. society.*** *What follows are pro and con arguments. What do you think?*

Pro

The decline of the traditional family will

- foster continuing high divorce rates.
- lead to more sexual promiscuity and unwanted pregnancies.
- result in a greater number of people living in poverty.
- increase the number of neglected, latchkey kids.
- increase juvenile delinquency.
- increase the number of overworked and over-stressed single parents who don't function well at home or on the job.

Con

The decline of the traditional family will

- mean change but not breakdown—other societies function well with diverse styles of family life.
- result in more equitable arrangements for women.
- afford families a more prosperous lifestyle when both spouses work outside the home.
- give people a choice in the type of family they want.
- allow people to be parents without forcing them to marry.
- affirm and support the diversity Americans cherish.

of the respondents said that they speak on an average day with a family member who doesn't live in their house. And family members (including spouses) are the most likely source to which people turn for help when facing problems.

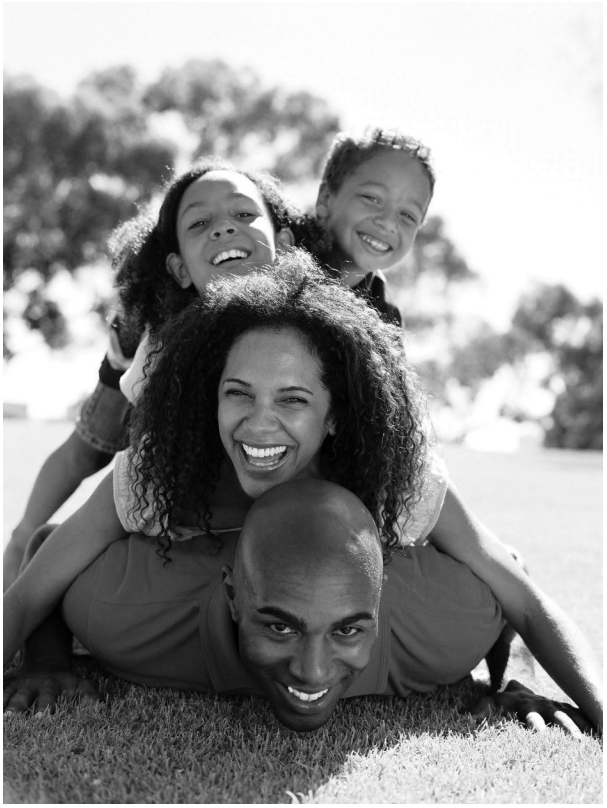
In short, most Americans, including those who have been victimized by dysfunctional marriages and family lives, continue to value marriage and family. They want good marriages and satisfying family lives for themselves. And a large majority of those living in a family situation affirm that it is the source of their greatest satisfaction in life.

'TIL DEATH?

For the majority who opt for marriage and family, what are the prospects? To the extent that our expressive individualistic values prevail, people will enter and remain in a marriage only so long as it is perceived to be personally beneficial to them. They will then divorce and may seek to fulfill their intimacy needs through another marriage. Indeed, some have raised the question of whether any other pattern is realistic if people are to have their needs fulfilled. That is, can two people maintain a long-term relationship that is not only stable but also satisfying to them both?

More than four decades ago, Levinger (1965) argued that relationships can be described in terms of their stability and satisfaction. Some marriages are high on both (a "full-shell" marriage), some are low on both ("no-shell"), and some have one without the other ("half-shell" marriages are those that are happy but for some reason cannot survive; "empty-shell" marriages are those that last but do not bring satisfaction). All four of these types can still be found. For some, the marriage proves to be unsatisfactory almost from the start. Like the young man who married a woman because of the "great sex" they had, the no-shell marriages break up in a short time (half of all marriages that break up do so within the first seven years).

But are there empty-shell marriages, those that are unsatisfactory yet stable? The answer is yes. In our study of 351 long-term marriages (Lauer and Lauer 1986), the only criterion for being included in the sample was a minimum of 15 years of marriage. We anticipated that virtually all would have a satisfying union, because people tend not to remain in an unhappy marriage. But in nearly 15 percent (51) of the couples, one or both of the partners were unhappy to some extent. Why did they stay together? The two major reasons were a sense of duty (religious beliefs or family tradition) and children. A study employing a national sample and looking directly for reasons for stability in unhappy marriages found that



Play strengthens family life.
Jacobs Stock Photography/Getty Images

those in the more stable unions (as measured by perceived chances for separation or divorce) tended to be older, be committed to marriage as an institution, and believe that divorce would only further detract from their happiness. Compared to those in less stable marriages, they also had less social activity and less sense of control over their lives (Heaton and Albrecht 1991).

It is the first pattern noted previously, of course, the highly stable *and* satisfying marriage, that Levinger called "full-shell," that has been the ideal in modern American life. But can it happen? Can people live together in a vital, meaningful relationship "'til death do us part"? Again, the answer is yes. For some people, marriage is still an experience that enhances their physical and mental health and their general sense of well-being:

> Marriage places more demands on people than friendship, but the rewards are enormous for those who are able to work through the differences and annoyances and maintain a growing relationship. For some, the rewards are so immense that marriage is a watershed in their lives (Lauer and Lauer 1988:86).

What are the ingredients of such a marriage? We asked our happy couples to select from 39 factors those that they regarded as most important in their own experience. In order of the frequency with which they were named, the following are the reasons given by husbands and wives:

Husbands

1. My spouse is my best friend.
2. I like my spouse as a person.
3. Marriage is a long-term commitment.
4. Marriage is sacred.
5. We agree on aims and goals.
6. My spouse has grown more interesting.
7. I want the relationship to succeed.
8. An enduring marriage is important to social stability.
9. We laugh together.
10. I am proud of my spouse's achievement.
11. We agree on a philosophy of life.
12. We agree about our sex life.

Wives

1. My spouse is my best friend.
2. I like my spouse as a person.
3. Marriage is a long-term commitment.
4. Marriage is sacred.
5. We agree on aims and goals.
6. My spouse has grown more interesting.
7. I want the relationship to succeed.
8. We laugh together.
9. We agree on a philosophy of life.
10. We agree on how and how often to show affection.
11. An enduring marriage is important to social stability.
12. We have a stimulating exchange of ideas.

Even though husbands and wives were interviewed or filled out their questionnaires separately, the first seven items are exactly the same! The order varies somewhat after that, but there are no striking differences between husbands and wives. There seems to be considerable consensus on what it takes to forge a union that is both long-lasting and fulfilling to both partners.

A follow-up study of 100 couples married 45 years or more found virtually the same results and the same general consensus between men and women (Lauer, Lauer, and Kerr 1990). And other researchers have come to the same conclusion that the factors involved in marital stability and marital satisfaction are similar for husbands and wives (Sharlin 1996; Kurdek 2005).

Note that the most important factor is liking your spouse, liking the kind of person to whom you are married, appreciating the kind of person that he or she is. Three of the first six factors relate to the individual's perception of the kind of person the spouse is. It is not only a myth but a dangerous myth that people marry each other purely out of love. As one wife, who rated her marriage as "extremely happy," told us,

> I feel that liking a person in marriage is as important as loving that person. I have to like him so I will love him when things aren't so rosy. Friends enjoy each other's company—enjoy doing things together . . . That's why friendship really ranks high in my reasons for our happy marriage.

A husband summed up the importance of friendship and liking when he said, "Jen is just the best friend I have. I would rather spend time with her, talk with her, be with her than anyone else." And a wife noted that she liked the kind of person her husband was so much that she would want to be friends with him even if she wasn't married to him.

Next to liking and being friends with one's spouse, people talked about the importance of commitment. Couples in unhappy marriages also ranked commitment high, but there was a difference in their commitment. They were committed primarily to the institution of marriage. Once in a particular union, therefore, they were determined to make it last, regardless of how unhappy they were. In other words, they were committed to maintaining a marriage but were not really committed to each other. Couples in happy marriages, on the other hand, are committed to marriage and to their spouses. This involves a determination to work through whatever problems might cause dissatisfaction. As expressed by one wife,

> We've remained married because 40 years ago our peer group just did. We worked our way through problems that today we might walk away from. Our marriage is firm and filled with respect and love, but it took time and work. In a marriage today, we might have separated. I'm glad we didn't. I can't emphasize this too strongly. I have two children who are divorced. They are still searching for a magical something that isn't obtainable in the real world. Marriage grows through working out problems and going on. Our marriage took 40 years and we are still learning.

There are many other factors that are important, such as humor and the ability to handle conflict constructively. The point is that a long-term and satisfying marriage is not merely a matter of finding just the right person who can make you happy. It is a matter of two people who have some positive factors going for them (such as liking each other and sharing similar values) working together in a committed relationship to achieve a mutually satisfying life. Even in an age of rapid change and high divorce rates, the full-shell marriage can be a reality for those who wish it.

A NOTE ON THEORY

In simplest terms, a **theory** is an explanation. For example, the myth that people marry simply because they love each other may be based on the theory that love is a dominant emotion in human life. It is an emotion that we can recognize and one that structures the nature of our relationships. More formally, a theory is a set of logically related propositions that explain some phenomenon (see, for example, Sternberg's triangular theory of love in chapter 6).

Social scientists use theories not only to explain but also to guide research. Consequently, theory is an important part of the study of intimate relationships. There is, however, no single theory that encompasses the field of marriage and the family. In fact, most theoretical perspectives used to study intimate relationships are borrowed from other disciplines. In this section, we will briefly describe the more commonly used theories and note a few places in the text where they apply. Because we stress practical application, we will not elaborate on theory in the remaining chapters. For an interesting exercise, try to read through one of the subsequent chapters and see which of the following theories seem to apply to the various findings in that chapter.

Systems Theory

A variety of theories fall under the general heading of **systems theory,** but all share certain assumptions. As applied to intimate relationships, systems theory asserts that the intimate group must be analyzed as a whole; the group has boundaries that distinguish it from other groups. Thus, particular people form the system and have particular rules and roles that apply to their system. Furthermore, the group is composed of interrelated parts (individuals). That is, the parts are not independent but influence each other and work together in such a way that the system tends to be maintained; outside influences generally cause minimal change. If the system is composed of three or more individuals (as in a family with children), various subsystems may arise (e.g., parent and child may form a coalition against the other parent). Although such subsystems may appear to be threatening, they actually tend to maintain the system. For instance,

a woman may remain in a marriage only because she and her child support and protect each other when the alcoholic husband and father becomes abusive.

Family therapists use systems theory. Among the well-known theories of family therapists is that of Murray Bowen (1978), who built his theory on the premise that humans respond primarily at the emotional rather than the cognitive level. In this theory, two tasks are important for healthy development. The first is to develop our cognitive functioning so that our behavior is not driven mainly by our emotions. The second is to develop our individuality so that we have separate identities from our family of origin even while remaining members of that family (Charles 2001).

These tasks may be complicated by certain family processes, such as the formation of coalitions (subsystems) and the tendency to transmit unhealthy patterns from one generation to another (the system maintaining itself). Thus, what appears to be an individual's problem may be a problem arising out of the family system. In order to help the individual, a therapist should treat the family, for it is the system itself and not merely one of its parts that is not functioning in a healthy way. Bowen's theory is, of course, far more complex than we can discuss here, but see our discussion of the use and misuse of power in chapter 10 for an example of its application.

Exchange Theory

"You owe me one" is a popular expression of **exchange theory,** which asserts that we all attempt to keep our costs lower than our rewards in interaction. Some social scientists believe that the notion of costs and rewards is the best way to understand intimate relationships like marriage (see, e.g., Nakonezny and Denton 2008). *Costs* refer to such things as time, money, emotional or intellectual energy, or anything else that an individual defines as part of his or her investment in a relationship. Similarly, *rewards* include emotional or intellectual gratification, money, a sense of security, or anything else an individual defines as a satisfying outcome of a relationship. If a relationship consistently costs us more than it rewards us, we are likely to avoid the person or break the relationship.

Exchange theory posits a rational assessment of a situation. The individual weighs the pros and cons, the costs and rewards, of a situation. He or she tries to determine if the situation is fair or appealing or worthwhile. To some extent, this happens in selecting a life partner (see the discussion in chapter 7). It happens in the negotiation of responsibilities of dual-career couples (chapter 11). It occurs in many other areas of family life, such as decision making, child rearing, and division of labor in the home. Exchange theory does not explain all of family life, but it is clearly of value in our efforts to understand.

Symbolic Interaction Theory

Symbolic interaction theory views humans primarily as cognitive creatures who are influenced and shaped by their interaction experiences (Lauer and Handel 1983). That is, what happens in interaction is a result not merely of what individuals bring to it but also of the interaction itself. Like systems theorists, symbolic interactionists believe that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Thus, a young woman who has determined to devote herself to a career rather than marry may find herself changing her mind as she interacts with a particular man. Or a man who is negative about parenthood may find himself becoming enthusiastic and committed as he interacts with his child.

An important concept in symbolic interactionism is **definition of the situation.** According to this concept, when we define a situation as real, it has real consequences. That is, our interpretation of a situation is as important as anything that is objectively true about that situation. For example, a man may be very jealous of his girlfriend because he believes she is flirting with other men. In point of fact, she may be completely faithful to her boyfriend. But if he perceives her to be flirting, there will be real—and perhaps damaging—consequences to the relationship.

Depending on how they define their situation, then, people may be satisfied in a relationship that outsiders view as undesirable or dissatisfied in one that outsiders view as very good. Our discussion of spouse abuse in chapter 14 points out how abused women perceive their situation in a variety of ways that justify staying in the relationship.

Symbolic interactionism can be combined with exchange theory. For example, what is important is not that rewards exceed costs in some objective sense or as assessed by an outside observer but that the people involved in a relationship perceive the rewards to exceed the costs (see the discussion of equity in chapter 8).

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory asserts that all societies are characterized by inequality, conflict, and change as groups within the society struggle over scarce resources. These groups have differing and even contradictory interests, needs, and goals. Because of the contradictions and because the things for which people strive may not be available

in sufficient number for all, everyone cannot be satisfied. Individuals from the differing groups therefore struggle with each other, using whatever resources they have, each striving to meet his or her own interests, needs, and goals.

In family studies, conflict theory is seen in explanations that focus on two types of groups: social class and gender. A **social class** is a group of people with similar levels of income, education, and occupational prestige and a similar lifestyle. The higher your social class, the more resources you have available to you. At various points in this book, you will encounter some class differences in family life. Class differences are prominent in chapter 2, where we discuss the disadvantages faced by those (single parents and most racial/ethnic groups) who have a disproportionate number of their families in the lower classes.

Conflict theory also is used to explain gender differences. Feminists argue that the traditional family is a patriarchal arrangement that men use to maintain their power over women. Some believe that men have an inherent advantage in the power struggle because they possess more of a crucial resource—money. Typically, men have brought more money than women have into the household, thereby establishing their power over women and having the final say in any decisions that matter to them.

In various parts of this book, we will employ conflict theory to look at gender differences in terms of "his" experience and "her" experience (e.g., of marriage in chapter 8 and of parenting in chapter 12). Conflict theory also can be used to explain such phenomena as power struggles (chapter 10).

Theory and Intimacy

A common reaction from students when we talk about theory is, "I'm interested in the practical stuff, but not in theory. What use is theory to me?"

Actually, theory can be used to understand all the topics in this book. Some theories, of course, work better than others for explaining particular topics. But all are useful in enhancing your understanding of intimate relationships.

One of our students provided us with an interesting example of the utility of theory. Here is her story:

> I went through a series of relationships, finally got married, and within a few years was divorced. I thought I would never find "Mr. Right." So I decided to get my college degree. When I took a social psychology class and studied symbolic interactionism, I had a revelation: I divorced my husband because he was a man!
>
> I know that sounds silly. What I mean is, I learned that our behavior reflects the gender roles that we learn in our society. I thought my ex-husband was just a bad catch. Now I realize that he was only acting like most men who learn the traditional male role in our society. I know now that I could have accepted this and that we could have worked together to iron out the things that were vexing me.
>
> It's just too bad I didn't take the course before I got married.

The student learned a better way to understand behavior than simply concluding, "I married a jerk." The point is, the theories alert you to look for certain things in intimate relationships and to understand them in particular ways. For example, understanding of a theory may prompt you to ask, "What was the family system in which my partner grew up and how can my knowledge of that help me in our relationship?" (systems theory); "Is our relationship less satisfying because one of us feels that it costs more than it's worth?" (exchange theory); "Is money an issue with us because we define its use and importance differently rather than because one of us is right and the other is wrong?" (symbolic interactionism); and "Are we arguing so long and hard because we are engaged in a power struggle rather than in a conflict over a single issue?" (conflict theory).

These examples are only illustrations, but they underscore the fact that an understanding of theory is an important tool for you to use in building and maintaining meaningful intimate relationships. Because theory is important, therefore, we identify specifically at one or more places in each chapter the way a particular theory applies and note in the margin the theory being used. These notations provide you with many more examples of how you can use theory to better understand and thereby enhance your own intimate relationships.

SUMMARY

Humans are social creatures and have, therefore, a basic need for close, personal relationships. The experiences of loneliness, both social and emotional loneliness, and of gaining well-being through intimate relationships illustrate our social nature and our need for intimacy.

We learn about family life through our own experiences and through the mass media. But some of what we know is mythical. Some of the common myths today include, (1) we've lost the extended family, (2) opposites attract, (3) people marry because they love each other, (4) having children increases marital satisfaction, (5) a good sex life is the best predictor of marital satisfaction, (6) happily married people don't have conflict, and (7) half of all marriages end in divorce. Such myths are dangerous because they can ruin good relationships.

Patterns of intimate relationships change over time. In recent years, there has been an increase in premarital sex, out-of-wedlock births, the number of people living alone, the number of people cohabiting, age at first marriage, and the proportion of mothers who work. The divorce rate has declined but is still much higher than it was through most of the twentieth century. Birth rates and average household size have both declined.

Social scientists debate what Americans need in the way of marriage and family life. Some argue that alternative forms of the family are as valid and as fulfilling as the heterosexual, married-couple family, while others insist that the heterosexual, married-couple family is crucial to both individual and social well-being.

For various reasons, only a minority of Americans now live in a family that has an employed father, a stay-at-home mother, and children. Some experts believe this is a trend that will continue, lessening the importance of marriage, while others assert the trend will reverse. Americans are seeking to work out what they want in the context of the contrary values of familism and individualism. But the strengths and benefits of marriage and family are so clear that most Americans continue to value them and to indicate satisfaction with their own marriage and family life. Those who desire a stable and satisfying marriage and family are still able to achieve them.

KEY TERMS

birth rate *11*
cohabitation *11*
conflict theory *21*
definition of the situation *21*
emotional loneliness *4*
exchange theory *21*
extended family *7*
familism *17*
family of origin *4*
integration *5*
intimacy *4*
loneliness *4*
myth *6*
nuclear family *7*
social class *22*
social loneliness *4*
symbolic interaction theory *21*
systems theory *20*
theory *20*
values *16*

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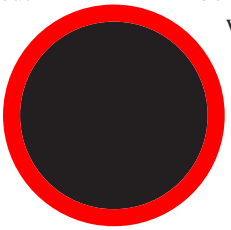
ON THE WEB Marriage and Family in America: Needs, Myths, and Dreams

As noted in the text, we get our information about marriage and family from both experience and the mass media. An important source of information among the mass media is the Internet. There is also a certain amount of misinformation, so you must be careful about which sources you use. It's a good idea to begin with sites that are provided by experts such as researchers. Two very good sites are:



National Council on Family Relations (NCFR)
http://www.ncfr.org

This site, sponsored by a prestigious organization that publishes two of the better journals, not only posts various news items and information about professional activities but also gives you access to press reports based on articles published in their professional journals.

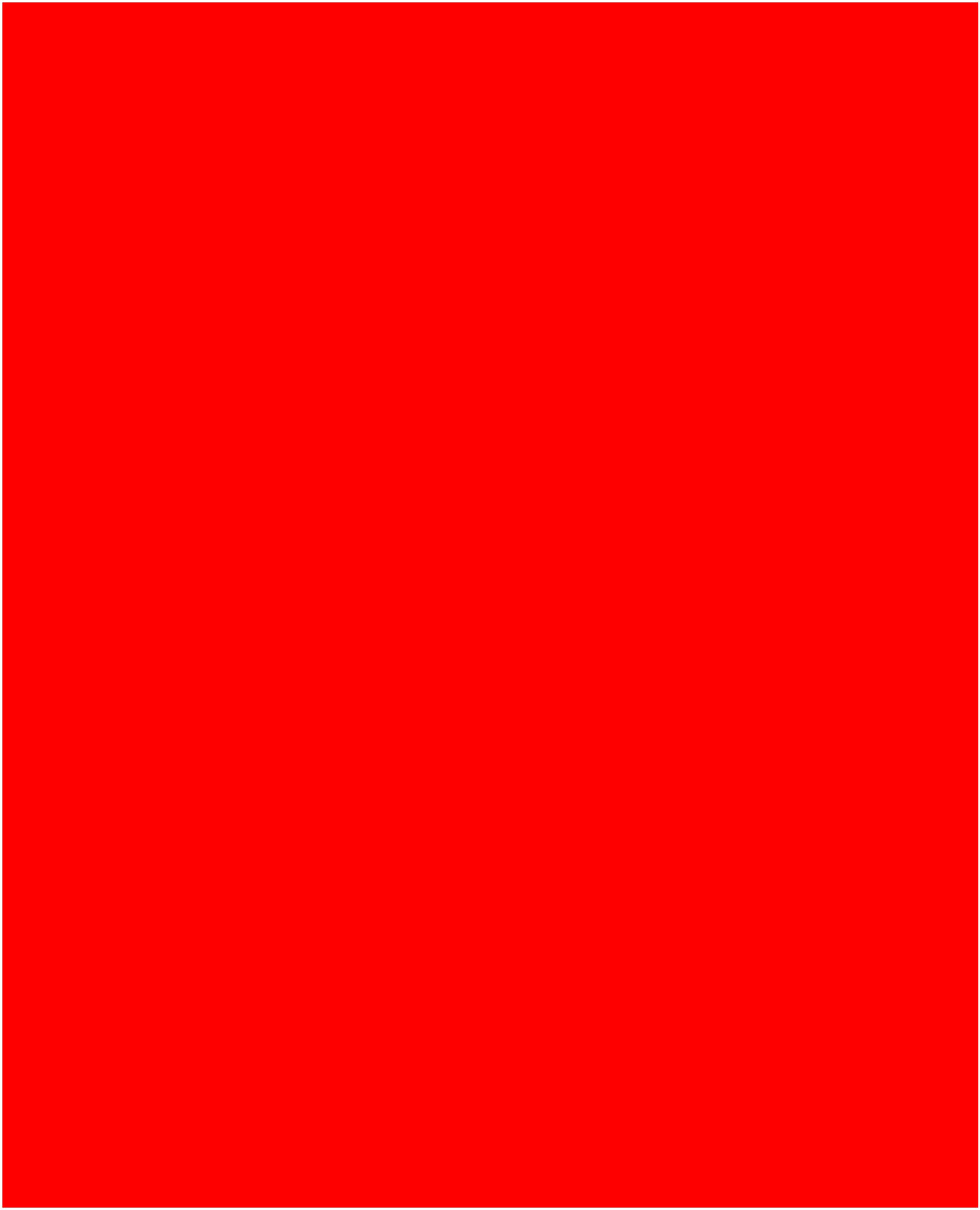
The National Marriage Project
http://www.nationalmarriageproject.org

Based at the University of Virginia, the National Marriage Project engages in ongoing research into various aspects of marriage and family life. The site offers access to their varied publications.

Using these two sites, enlarge your understanding with the following projects:

1. Go to the NCFR site and click on "press release." You will have access to releases that describe articles published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* and in *Family Relations.* Select one that interests you, then try to put the findings into the theoretical perspectives described in this chapter. Which theoretical perspective seems most useful? Which one or ones appear not to be useful? Why?
2. A number of important trends are noted in this chapter ("changing patterns of intimate relationships"). Check the press releases for both journals at the NCFR site, and examine the recent publications at the National Marriage Project site. To what extent are either of these sites addressing the trends? What new or updated information can you find related to the trends? Which trends seem to be ignored, and how could you explain the omissions?
3. Imagine you have to speak to a group of high school teenagers about what they can expect in terms of their own future marriages and family life. Use information from the two sites to outline a 45-minute talk that you think would be useful for them.

Design Elements: Flower: McGraw Hill; Silhouette of Head: Fine Art/Shutterstock; On the Web Box: McGraw Hill



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2

~ Diversity in Families ~

Learning Objectives

After reading and studying chapter 2, you should be able to

1. Briefly discuss how families vary across time and among and within societies.
2. Define what a *family* is.
3. Explain the problems of the single-parent family.
4. Discuss the various ways the single-parent family copes with its problems.
5. Outline the similarities and differences among African American, Hispanic, Asian American, Native American, and white families in U.S. society.
6. Describe life in the contemporary Black family.
7. Discuss the strengths as well as the problems of the Hispanic family.
8. Explain how the Asian culture shapes the structure and experience of Asian American families.
9. Identify two factors that affect Native American family life.
10. Understand the difficulties of interracial families and the ways in which they cope with these problems.
11. Describe the similarities and differences between hetero-sexual and homosexual families in developing lasting intimate relationships.

Have you ever played the game of word association? For example, when you hear the word *fun,* what is the first word that comes to your mind? How about *happiness? Dating? Marriage?* Jot down your first response to each word.

Now respond to the word *family.* Instead of just one response, however, write down five words that come to mind. Then think about your responses. Why do you think you made these particular associations? Are there any common elements in your choices? Did your responses to *fun, happiness, dating,* and *marriage* have anything to do with family life? Based on your responses, what is your family like?

How do you think other people would respond to the words? Would they respond differently depending on their family situations or backgrounds? Ask 10 others to play the game of word association with you. If possible, select two different groups of five people each, such as five married people and five single parents, or five white and five Black married people, or five heterosexuals and five homosexuals. If that isn't possible, get people who come from as many of the groups discussed in this chapter as possible.

Write down their responses. Then compare the two groups or those from differing groups. What kinds of meaning of family life seem to emerge from the words they chose? Do you see any differences among them? If so, how would you explain the differences? If not, why do you think there are no differences?

If the entire class participates in this project, you can specify the groups you want to investigate (perhaps three or four different groups) and pool the results. What conclusions would you now draw about the meaning of *family?*

Imagine that you are an artist and that you have been asked to draw or paint a picture of a family. You may use any setting you like. What would you draw? Whatever the setting, you would probably draw an adult man, an adult woman, and one or more children. And for many of you, these people would probably be white.

But some families are composed of only two people—an adult and a child. Some are composed of nonwhites. Others are racially mixed. And others are composed of two adults of the same sex, with or without children. Because there are so many variations, the question arises as to what is meant by *family.* One way to define it is to identify the functions that all families fulfill. Anthropologists identify four functions: sexual relations, reproduction, socialization of children, and economic cooperation. However, each of these functions, except the socialization of children, is lacking in families in one or more societies in the world (Reiss and Lee 1988). And even socialization is lacking in those families that are childless.

Our definition of **family,** therefore, is a group united by marriage or cohabitation, blood, and/or adoption in order to satisfy intimacy needs and/or bear and socialize children. Satisfying intimacy needs and rearing children always take place in a social context, however. Such factors as social class, race, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and type of community (urban or rural) all have some bearing upon marriage and family life.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF FAMILY LIFE

Let's go back to the picture of a family. Does social context make any difference? That is, does it make any difference in the family life if the people are white or Hispanic or part of a nonwhite racial group, **heterosexual** or **homosexual,** a couple, or a single parent? In many ways, the answer is "no," because whatever the social context, Americans want most of the same things: a marriage that is satisfying and that lasts, children who grow up with both parents and who do well in their lives, a family with strong and meaningful bonds, and so on. Thus, a study of white and Hispanic mothers in a northern California community found differences between the two groups in income and educational attainment, but found no differences between the values placed on, and the amount of time given to, work, marriage, and parenting (Franco, Sabattini, and Crosby 2004). And a study of high school seniors reported similar, high long-term educational and occupational goals among all racial/ethnic groups—white, African American, Asian American, and Hispanic (Chang et al. 2006).

At the same time, the extent to which people are able to live out their values for marriage and family life is affected by the social context. In particular, lower social class position, prejudice, and discrimination adversely affect those striving to realize their ideals. For example, while Americans generally value high educational achievement for themselves and their children, the factor most strongly associated with that achievement is social class position (Fang and Sen 2006). The lower your social class position, the lower your educational achievement is likely to be. Another example is spousal violence, which is also more likely—independently of race or ethnicity—among the poor (Frias and Angel 2005).

Culture is another part of social context that can affect family life. For example, Asian culture stresses the subordination of the individual to the group. As we shall point out later in this chapter, that translates into such things as the socialization of children into the values of obedience, loyalty, and self-control to a greater extent than is true of other groups. Similarly, Native American culture has a strong emphasis on custom and tradition and the extended family.

Some of the families we examine in this chapter are diverse because of such cultural emphases. But the most important factor in the diversity found in them is the fact that they are disproportionately in the lower social classes and/or the victims of prejudice and discrimination. Their diverse experiences of marriage and family life occur in a corrosive social context. We will point out differences between families from varying racial/ethnic groups in subsequent chapters (i.e., wherever research has identified differences). Here, we want to look at how families fare in the struggle to build intimate relationships in the face of low social class position, prejudice and discrimination, and variant cultural traditions.

We will first look briefly at how families vary among and within human societies generally. Then we will examine various U.S. families that are affected by low social class position and/or prejudice and discrimination. As table 2.1 shows, a disproportionate number of single-parent (where the mother is the parent), African American, and Hispanic families are in the lowest social class (below the poverty level in income). They are also, like those in interracial and in gay and lesbian families, subject to a certain amount of prejudice and discrimination. They have, therefore, additional pressures and constraints as they strive to maintain a meaningful family life.

TABLE 2.1 Percent of People below the Poverty Level, 2019

	Percent
All people	10.5
People in families	8.5
In white families	7.1
In Black families	17.0
In Hispanic families	14.4
In Asian American families	5.5
In families with female householder, no husband present	24.3

Source: Semega et al. 2020.

THE VARIABILITY OF FAMILY LIFE

Families vary across time, among societies, and within societies. It would require a number of volumes to fully discuss such variations. In this section, we only want to illustrate the variability with a few examples.

Variations among Societies

In some ways, people everywhere are alike. People everywhere, for example, need intimate relations and form family units to fulfill some of their intimacy needs. When we talk about variations, then, we are not overlooking the similarities among peoples. Rather, we are stressing the important points that intimacy needs can be fulfilled in diverse ways and diverse kinds of family units can be formed.

The variations among societies underscore the fact that some differ from what we may regard as normal, natural, right, or typical. For example, our ideal is for marriage to be "til death do us part." Marco Polo reported a tribe in Asia in which a wife could take another husband if her first husband was away from home for 20 days; the husband could also take another wife if he was staying in a different place (Durant 1954:38).

Another of our ideals is choice—individuals should personally choose whom they marry. But many cultures have or have had the practice of **arranged marriage,** in which the parents choose marital partners for their children. The bride and groom may not even see each other before the wedding. We discuss more about arranged marriages in chapter 7.

Finally, the ideal of most Americans is **monogamy,** union with one person at a time. We say "most" Americans because the early Mormons, as a part of their belief system, practiced a form of polygamy. **Polygamy** is the marriage of one person to two or more people of the opposite sex. **Polygyny** is the marriage of a man to two or more wives, while **polyandry** is the marriage of a woman to two or more husbands. Although illegal in the United States, some Mormon groups have continued to practice it. In fact, a 2020 law decriminalized the practice of polygyny, making it an infraction rather than a felony (Kaur 2020).

Polygyny has been practiced by more human societies than any other form of marriage. Most preindustrial societies as well as modern Muslim societies allow polygyny. While Americans are prone to see polygyny as a form of female oppression, women who are part of such unions sometimes define them quite differently. Many Mormon wives in the nineteenth century vigorously tried to get the federal government to allow polygyny. And some would argue that there is at least as much to say in favor of it as there is against it (Burton 2020). Of course, not all women in a polygynous marriage are happy with the arrangement. As noted by a study of polygynous wives in the African nation of Cameroon the wives most satisfied with the arrangement were junior (newer and younger) wives rather than senior wives, those with more children (a status symbol in the society), and those whose husbands had a higher economic status (Gwanfogbe et al. 1997). For many polygynous wives, it is *their* situation that is the ideal, not the monogamous union that is idealized in U.S. society.

On the other hand, some women find the polygynous arrangement very unsatisfying. Interviews with ten polygynous families in an Arab town in the south of Israel reported that half of the families seemed to be well-functioning and half were functioning poorly. But the experience was painful to some extent for the wives in both kinds of families (Slonim-Nevo and Al-Krenawi 2006). Similarly, interviews with 15 polygynous wives in Ghana found that most disapproved of the practice (Tabi, Soter, and Cheney 2010). They recognized some advantages (sharing household chores and child-rearing duties) but also reported such problems as a lack of intimacy with their husbands, loneliness, competition between the wives, jealousy, and unhappiness.

Other variations are based not so much in ideals as in common practices. In our society, at least until recent times, a woman typically assumed the surname of the man she married. Couples establish their own residence, and the family tree is traced through both the husband's and the wife's line. However, anthropologists have discovered a wide range of patterns in other societies. In some societies, for example, the man takes the woman's name. In others, the husband continues to live with his family, rather than with his wife, or couples may alternate residence between the man's and the woman's families. People in some

The traditional arranged marriage in India is one of the cultural variations in family life.
Erica Simone Leeds

societies trace their line only through the man, while others trace it only through the woman.

There are, in sum, a wide range of practices that people have developed to satisfy their intimacy needs in families. No evidence exists that any particular practice works best for people generally. In fact, one could argue that the diversity of family life is both necessary and desirable if the maximum number of people are to find satisfying family relationships.

Variations within Societies

Within any particular society, family life varies over time. And in a complex, modern society, it varies among groups at any particular point in time as well. The core of this chapter will explore these variations among groups. Here, we want to illustrate how the family has varied over time by looking at a few aspects of white families in colonial America (Queen, Habenstein, and Quadagno 1985). You can compare the following materials with what you know about white family life today.

The American colonists generally believed that it was important for every individual to be a part of a household. Single people were not merely encouraged to be married but were stigmatized if they remained single too long. In some cases, they were even penalized; Maryland, for instance, imposed a tax on bachelors.

In spite of the stigma on singlehood, it was not easy to get married. In the early years of the southern colonies, there were about four men for every woman. And in all the colonies, a young man was expected to be financially independent before he married. This meant that he had to have a home on his own land. Once financially secure, he had to secure the permission of the prospective bride's father before he could even begin the courtship.

When a couple was ready to marry, they would make their intention known publicly. This could be done by a posted notice in a public place or the reading of the banns (a public notice, normally given three times) in a public meeting or a church. New Englanders initially regarded marriage as a civil affair. Magistrates, not clergy, performed wedding ceremonies. Not until 1692 were clergymen allowed to perform weddings in Massachusetts. In the southern colonies, except for Maryland, the clergy were required to perform the marriage services.

Because of lack of birth control, marriage was likely to lead quickly to children, and families tended to be large. Seven or more children were not uncommon. Colonial families were not likely to face an "empty nest" at middle age under such circumstances. Unmarried children could be living at home until the parents were fairly old.

Sexual standards were strict. In New England, unmarried people caught in the act of having intercourse could be fined, whipped, forced to marry, or any combination of the three. Some of the colonies were even stricter in the matter of adultery. Some offenders were required to wear publicly a scarlet letter. Some were whipped or sentenced to time in the pillory. And a few were put to death. The standards were the same in the South, but the

penalties were far less severe. Even in the South, however, an offender could be publicly censured and punished.

As in modern America, marriage did not always work out well in the colonies. Divorce was much rarer, however. In the southern colonies, divorce was not legal; unhappy couples might eventually separate, or one or the other spouse might desert. In contrast, because marriage was a civil contract among the early Puritans of New England, the contract could be dissolved by a local court. Adultery, cruelty, and a long period of absence were among the reasons for which a court might grant a divorce. The court also gave the divorcing parties the right to remarry. Desertion was more common than divorce in early New England, leaving some women to raise their children alone.

Clearly, then, the colonial family differed from most families today in a number of important ways. If we had time to trace the family throughout American history, we would discover variations at each time period. Let's examine some of the diversity in family life in America today.

THE SINGLE-PARENT FAMILY

Single-parent families may occur in various ways, including divorce, death of a spouse, and the decision to have or adopt a child on one's own without getting married. An increasing number of people, particularly women, have opted for parenthood without marriage in recent years, in many cases with support from family, friends, employers, clergy, and physicians (Caumont 2013).

In the case of divorce, *single-parent* does not mean that the child has no contact with the other parent but that the child lives primarily with one parent. In other cases, contact with the other parent or with the biological parents (in the case of adoption) may not be possible. *Single-parent* also does not mean a permanent arrangement. In fact, using national data, Aquilino (1996) found that, among children born to unmarried mothers, only one in five spent their entire childhood in a single-parent home and nearly half had grandparents or other relatives living with them during their childhood.

Extent of Single-Parent Families

Single-parent families have increased considerably over the past decades. The Census Bureau reported that the number rose from 3.5 million in 1970 to 18.6 million in 2020, representing 20.4 percent of all families. The United States has the highest rate of children living in single-parent families in the world (Kramer 2019). Most of the single parents (15.1 million) are mothers. African

Single-parent families are an increasing proportion of all families.
Keith Brofsky/Getty Images

Americans and Hispanics have higher rates of single-parent families than do whites or Asian Americans.

People may be single parents by default: those abandoned or divorced by spouses, those left alone because the other parents were incarcerated, those left alone because the other parents didn't want to marry them, and those widowed. Becoming a single parent by default can pose severe problems for both parent and child. Hamer and Marchioro (2002) interviewed 24 Black men in an impoverished area who were single parents because the mothers weren't interested in parenting or had had their children taken away because they abused or neglected them. Although the men used their kin networks to help with the parenting, a combination of low wages and minimal assistance from social service agencies diminished their effectiveness as fathers.

Single parenting also may be a choice. A woman may want to be a mother, but may not want to get married