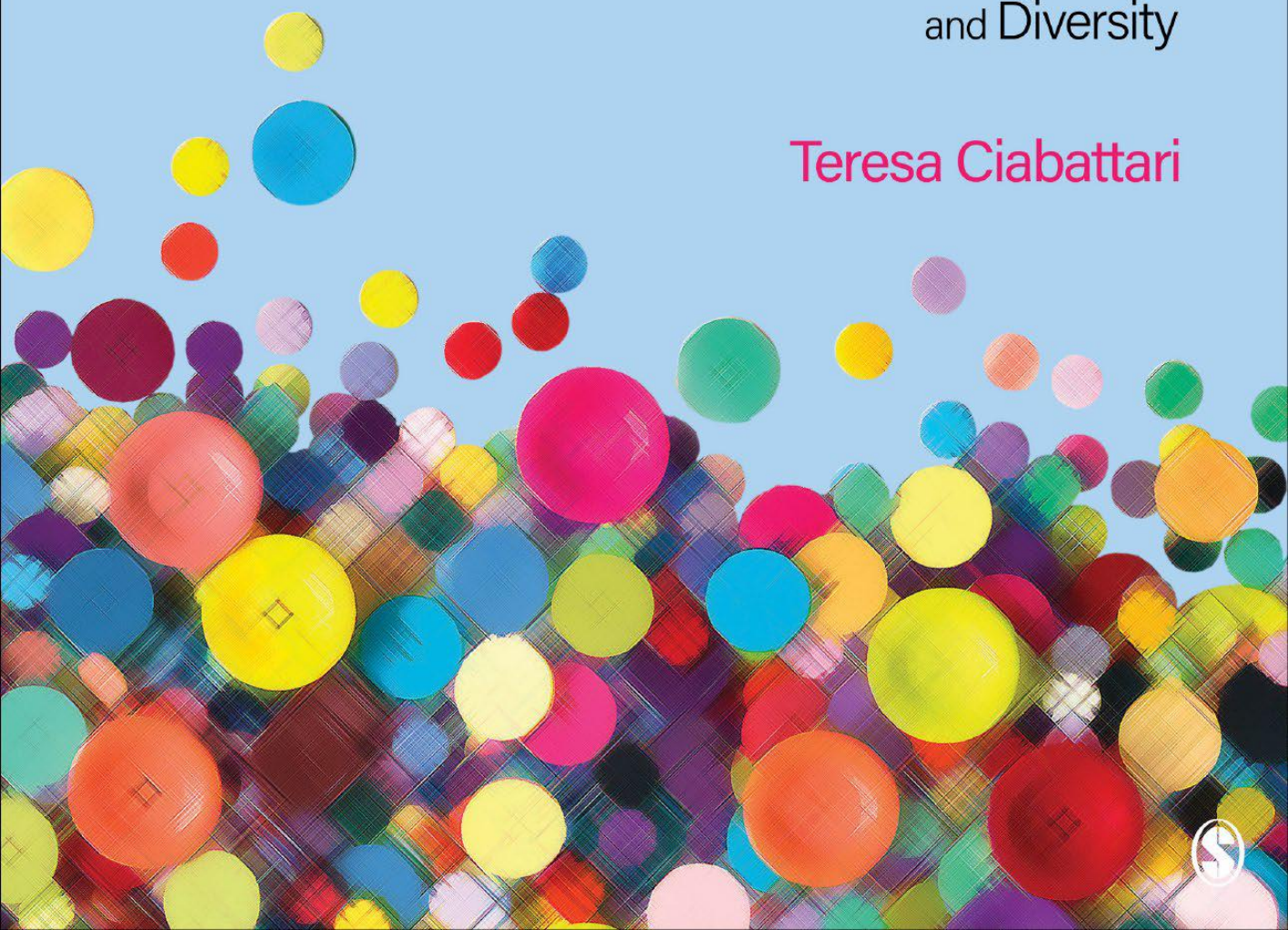
SECOND EDITION

SOCIOLOGY of Families

Change, Continuity, and Diversity

Teresa Ciabattari



Sociology of Families

Second Edition

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Pacific Lutheran University

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About the Author

Teresa Ciabattari is professor of sociology at Pacific Lutheran University, where she teaches courses on the sociology of family, research methods, statistics, race and racism, and gender. From 2018 to 2020, she served as the Director of Research, Professional Development, and Academic Affairs at the American Sociological Association. In this role, she led the association's teaching and learning initiatives and directed its research portfolio. Professor Ciabattari earned her undergraduate degree in sociology at Santa Clara University in California and her PhD in sociology at the University of Washington. As a scholar of family sociology, she has published articles on cohabitation, single mothers, and household labor. She is also a scholar of teaching and learning, publishing and presenting on topics including teaching writing to sociology majors, using quantitative data in the classroom, program review, and assessment of student learning.

Preface

Since the first edition of this text was published in 2017, I have heard from instructors all over the country who use it in their courses. They express their appreciation for a sociology of families textbook that is engaging, accessible, and, most significantly, committed to integrating discussions of diversity and inequality into every chapter. This second edition does even more to highlight how structures of inequality based on gender, race, social class, and sexuality shape the institution of the family in the United States.

I have been teaching courses on the sociology of U.S. families for 20 years. In that time, I have witnessed students' excitement in seeing their families represented in the scholarly literature; their discomfort in having their ideas about families challenged; their doubt when research findings are inconsistent with their own experience; and their growth as they develop a sociological imagination and apply it to the study of families. My goal in developing this text was to write an accessible and engaging learning tool to support students on this intellectual journey.

This text differs from other sociology of family textbooks in two major ways. First, as I mentioned above, this text is unique because it integrates family diversity and inequality into every chapter. Rather than having separate chapters on immigrant families, same-sex families, or families of different racial-ethnic groups, the experiences of these families are discussed throughout the text. This reduces the tendency to "other" families that differ from an imagined norm. Instead, families of all kinds are visible in each chapter, emphasizing the growing diversity of families in the United States. Second, the text is unique in that it considers not only how family patterns have changed but also how these changes reflect ideological continuities with longstanding trends in culture, law, and the economy. Change can feel threatening, but when we analyze these changes in their historical and social contexts, they often don't seem quite so radical.

This second edition introduces a new chapter on family violence, divides and expands the discussion of parenting and childhood into two chapters, and integrates significant updates to the remaining chapters. Chapter 11 on family violence teaches students about child abuse and neglect, intimate partner violence, and elder abuse. Using the latest statistics and research, it helps students identify the cultural and structural norms that create the conditions for family violence; analyze how structural inequalities related to gender, class, race, and sexuality impact family violence; and learn about policy responses and organized resistance to this violence. The new Chapter 7 dedicated to childhood explores how ideologies of childhood have changed over time, how children are socialized, and how children's experiences of childhood are shaped by race, class, and gender. Chapter 8 explores changing parenting ideologies, how parenting is gendered, raced, and classed, and the unique experiences of immigrant and LGBTQ parents.

In addition to these new chapters, the other nine chapters have been significantly revised and updated to include cutting edge sociological thinking about U.S. families, the most recent data and statistics, and expanded coverage of how families are impacted by structural inequalities. The first three chapters lay a sociological foundation for the rest of the book by introducing students to the sociological perspective on families, exploring a variety of ways to define family, and reviewing the theories and methods that sociologists use to study families. The remaining chapters focus on specific family experiences: the transition to adulthood, including discussion of dating and sexuality; marriage and cohabitation; divorce and relationship dissolution; childhood; parenting; family work; the family lives of older adults; and family violence. In each of these chapters, patterns of change and continuity are explored, and analysis of family experiences based on race, class, gender, and sexuality is centered. The book ends with a discussion of family policy and how current trends may shape U.S. families in the future.

I am grateful to all the instructors who have adopted this text and to all the students who have learned from it. I hope this second edition does even more to strengthen students' sociological imaginations and to deepen their knowledge of the sociology of families.

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I offer deep gratitude to my students, past and present. They inspire me, challenge me, humble me, and help me grow as a teacher, scholar, and human being. I am especially grateful to the students in my Sociology of Families course in spring 2015 who did a test run of an earlier version of this text. They read chapters, offered constructive feedback, and provided inspiration for the final stages of the book's development.

I am also grateful to my colleagues across the country who offered feedback at several stages of the book's development:

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Define key concepts in the sociological study of families, including science, institution, norms, roles, and social patterns

Describe patterns of family change and family continuities

Define the concepts of gender, race, social class, and sexuality, and describe how these structures of inequality shape families

Identify demographic characteristics of the U.S. population

Think of the word *family*, and what comes to mind? Is it a husband and wife with a couple of children? Yes, that is one kind of family. But family structures in the United States go far beyond this one image. Consider the following:

- 42 percent of adult Americans have at least one steprelative, such as a stepparent, stepsibling, or stepchild (Pew Research Center, 2011).
- 16 percent of same-sex couples are raising children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020a).
- 25 percent of American children live in immigrant families (Kids Count, 2020a), and tens of thousands of immigrants living in the United States are parenting children who still live in their country of origin.
- One in five Americans lives in a three-generation household (Cohn & Passel, 2018).
- 26 percent of children live with a single parent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a).

Contemporary American families are certainly complex, but they have never been simple. In colonial families, because of high mortality rates, the average length of a marriage was less than 12 years, and stepfamilies were more common then than they are today (Coontz, 1992; 2005). Among American women born in the late 1920s, up to 15 percent were pregnant on their wedding day (England, Shafer, & Wu, 2012). Even in the 1950s, when the breadwinner–homemaker family was at its peak, **family diversity** was commonplace: More than one in four married women were employed (Cohany & Sok, 2007); half of children were living in something other than a traditional breadwinner–homemaker family (Livingston, 2015); and one in three Americans older than 65 was poor, a rate that is three times higher than it is today (Semega, Kollar, Shrider, & Creamer, 2020).

Not only is diversity a long-standing feature of American families, so are concerns about family change. In 1642, the governors of the Massachusetts Bay colony decried the "great neglect in many parents and masters in training up their children in learning, and labor, and other employments" (Fass & Mason, 2000, p. 537). In 1905, Theodore Roosevelt wrote a special letter to Congress saying, "There is a widespread conviction that the divorce laws are dangerously lax and indifferently administered . . . resulting in a diminishing regard for the sanctity of the marriage relation" (U.S. Census Bureau, 1909). In the 1950s, sociologists Talcott Parsons and Robert Bales (1955) wrote about the "profound process of change" that the American family had experienced in the early 20th century, including high rates of divorce and more lenient sexual morality.

Compared with today's patterns, the "lenient" sexual morality, "lax" divorce laws, and "indulgent" childrearing that these commentators were concerned with are anything but. Yet, these concerns, as well as the underlying changes that brought them about, can tell us a few things about American families. First, change is a fact of life, and that is no less true for the **institution** of the family than it is for anything else. Second, not everyone will be happy with those changes, and some level of public resistance will accompany almost every family change we observe. And, finally, idealized images of how families should be can make invisible the complex realities of how families actually are.

Sociological Perspective on Families

Sociologist Émile Durkheim, one of the founders of **sociology** in the 19th century, defined sociology as the scientific study of institutions. Sociologists use the **scientific method**—the careful collection and analysis of data to make appropriate theoretical and **empirical** generalizations—to ask and answer questions about families. This means that social scientists go beyond anecdote and individual experiences to examine carefully collected data in a systematic way. For example, researchers who want to understand how couples divide the housework can't simply observe housework patterns in their households or the households

of their friends and neighbors. Instead, they must carefully select a sample of couples to observe. And to understand the patterns they observe, they use social scientific theories, abstract statements that make sense of the empirical patterns. In Chapter 3, you will learn more about the theories and research methods that sociologists use to study families.

The second key concept in Durkheim's definition of sociology is *institution*. Sociology studies the family as a **social institution**, a cluster of patterned behaviors governed by social **norms** and enacted by individuals occupying social **roles**. We are so well socialized into institutions that we generally accept them "as the way things are" without much thought or protest. Sociologists work to identify the norms, roles, patterns, and social contexts that shape social institutions and to make them explicit.

Norms are social expectations that guide behavior. For example, one norm of the family institution in the United States is that parents financially support their children. This established behavioral norm is so taken for granted that most people don't even think about it—it is part of the parental role, especially for fathers. Parents who shirk this duty, such as nonresidential parents who do not pay child support, are sanctioned both informally (e.g., by being labeled a "dead beat parent") and formally (e.g., by wage garnishing or jail time). In fact, federal and state governments spend millions of dollars each year to enforce child support compliance. As an alternative, the government could spend those millions of dollars supporting the children directly, rather than using that money to compel parents to provide support. But that would be inconsistent with the social norm that the financial support of children is the private responsibility of their parents.

As an institution, families are also made up of *roles*. A nonexhaustive list of family roles includes mother, father, son, daughter, sister, brother, cousin, mother-in-law, stepparent, grandparent, aunt, and uncle. Usually, one individual enacts multiple roles. For example, I am a daughter, sister, niece, spouse, aunt, and granddaughter. Each of these roles has specific scripts, or rules governing behaviors and interactions, attached to it. The social rules about how to enact the mother role differ from the rules for the father role or the sibling role or the grandparent role. We don't expect mothers, fathers, siblings, and grandparents to behave in the same ways, but we do have fairly clear expectations for each of them.

Of course, role expectations are not static; they change over time, in new contexts, and among different social groups. But once they are entrenched, they can also be resistant to change. For example, in recent years, the expectations for the mother role have expanded to include economic provision, but mothers, even when they are employed, are still expected to be the primary caregivers for children. The contemporary motherhood role has changed to include economic provision even while it continues to emphasize caregiving.

In addition to norms and roles, a third feature of studying the family as an institution is the focus on **social patterns**. Rather than describing or predicting an individual's behavior, sociologists focus on patterns *across* individuals and families. Not all families will exhibit the pattern (in fact, there will usually be many

individual exceptions), but the pattern itself is the focus of sociological analysis. Consider the relationship between age at marriage and divorce. Sociological research has consistently found a negative relationship between these two variables—those who marry at younger ages are more likely to divorce. This empirical pattern describes the relationship between the two variables, but it cannot predict what will happen to any specific couple. In fact, you may be able to think of a couple who is an exception to this pattern, a couple who married young and stayed married for decades. These individual exceptions do not invalidate the pattern, and it is these patterns that are the focus of the sociological perspective.

In 1959, C. Wright Mills used the term **sociological imagination** to describe this focus on social patterns. He distinguished between "personal troubles" and "public issues." Personal troubles occur within an individual and his or her direct experience, whereas public issues transcend the individual to take place within social and structural context. Mills considered several examples. In the case of unemployment, if only one person is unemployed, one can look to the characteristics of that person to explain why he or she does not have a job. When millions are unemployed, the source of the problem lies in the economy, in the social and structural context that makes jobs scarce or otherwise difficult to find. Mills also considered divorce:

> Inside a marriage a man and a woman may experience personal troubles, but when the divorce rate [is high], this is an indication of a structural issue having to do with the institutions of marriage and the family and other institutions that bear upon them. (Mills, 1959, p. 9)

Sociologists turn our attention to these structural issues and the patterns of behavior they shape.

Finally, sociologists study institutions within their social contexts. Even though we think about families and households as the "private sphere," they are anything but private. Our family forms are rooted in historical, economic, political, social, and legal contexts. The characteristics of these contexts will shape the characteristics of families within them. For example, it is more common to see three-generation families living together in expensive cities than in cities with lower costs of living (Waters, Carr, & Kefalas, 2011). The high cost of housing creates a social context in which shared households are more common.

Similarly, the legal context relating to marriage, childbearing, and inheritance defines who counts as a family and who does not. The social movement for the legal recognition of same-sex marriage emerged, in part, because same-sex couples were denied access to family rights including tax-free inheritance, medical decision making, and family reunification in immigration law. Stepfamilies are similarly undefined in the law. Unless a parent's new spouse legally adopts his or her child (which is rare because most children maintain legal ties with both biological parents, and, in most states, children can have only two legal parents), stepparent–stepchild relationships are not legally recognized. Without this legal

tie, stepparents and stepchildren have no formal rights or responsibilities in relationship to each other, which has implications for caregiving and decision making across the life course.

Family Change, Family Continuity

The family patterns we have seen in recent decades—**cohabitation**, divorce, nonmarital childbearing, employed mothers, same-sex marriage and childrearing—can seem like radical changes from the past. At first glance, these patterns may challenge fundamental values, identities, and understandings. But when we look at these changes more closely, we can see that they are consistent with broader trends in culture, law, and the economy, many of which have been going on for centuries and around the world. Looking more closely helps us recognize not only change but also **family continuities** over time.

This consideration of both change *and* continuity in families is a major theme of this book. Family changes are evident to most of us. But family continuities, ideological and behavioral threads that link the family patterns of today to those in the past, are an important part of the story as well. For example, arguments for the legal recognition of same-sex marriage are consistent with marital ideals that are more than 100 years old, ideals that emphasize marriage as a union based on romantic love, attraction, and partnership. Similarly, today's high rates of labor force participation among married white women are similar to patterns established by married middle-class Black women in the early 20th century (Landry, 2000). Another continuity is the practice of a wife taking her husband's last name, something that greater than 90 percent of American women still do (Gooding & Kreider, 2009) and that most Americans believe is best for families (Powell, Bolzendahl, Geist, & Steelman, 2010). This practice is rooted in the English common law principle of **coverture**, which stated that a husband and wife were a single legal entity; wives were subsumed under the personhood of their husbands. Legally, she existed as Mrs. John Doe. Although coverture no longer holds as a legal principle in the United States, its ideological foundation continues in marital naming practices. Examples like these demonstrate the ways that families have changed but also how today's patterns are rooted in past practices and meanings.

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Same-sex marriage is consistent with marital ideals that are more than 100 years old.

Family Diversity and Inequality

A second theme that is woven throughout the book is family diversity. The word *diversity* is often used to describe those who differ from some norm. This approach

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Extended families are central to family life for many Americans.

tends to center the experiences of the dominant group and to examine others as deviations from this norm. This book approaches diversity in a different way: not as a characteristic of those who are different but as a way to describe variation—some families look like *X*, whereas other families look like *Y*. Some patterns may be more common than others, but all are families. For this reason, rather than having separate chapters on Black families or single-parent families or same-sex families, this text incorporates families of all types within each chapter. This is an intentional choice to emphasize the way that diversity describes variety among all families, not just those who differ from an ideological or statistical norm.

The sociological perspective accepts family diversity as a given. What sociologists investigate is why variation in family patterns exist and what consequences might emerge. For example, Black individuals tend to have closer relationships with members of their extended families than do white individuals (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2012). There are more frequent calls and visits, more assistance with tasks such as childcare and transportation, and a more inclusive definition of who counts as part of the family. In investigating why, sociologists consider how **extended family** systems offer an adaptation to racial hierarchies. Extended family systems can provide a support system when other kinds of resources are lacking (Stack, 1974).

Thus, family diversity results from the different **social locations** that families occupy. This applies to families who are privileged by their social locations,

as well as to those who are disadvantaged. For example, higher education, an indicator of social class, has become one of the strongest predictors of marital and childbearing behaviors in the United States. Americans with a college degree tend to get married and then have children, whereas those without a college degree are more likely to have children without being married and may forego marriage all together. Both groups are influenced by their social location. Although we often pay more attention to those who are disadvantaged, occupying a privileged position on the top of a social hierarchy shapes family behaviors as much as a disadvantaged position on the bottom does. Understanding family diversity means looking at families in all social locations and at how inequality shapes those family experiences.

Family diversity exists because families, and individuals within them, have differential access to economic, legal, political, and cultural resources. Hierarchies of **gender**, **race**, **social class**, and **sexuality** are especially influential for families. Each of these is a socially constructed system of stratification that divides people into groups and influences how resources are distributed in society. These inequalities shape family experiences and opportunities and create a social context that has a profound influence on opportunities available to American families and on the experiences of individuals within them. In a context where sexism, racism, economic inequality, and heterosexism are realities in American life, families can't help but be shaped by them. This social fact—that "families are embedded in societal contexts in which power and privilege are distributed unequally" (Allen, Fine, & Demo, 2000, p. 2)—is fundamental to the sociological perspective on families.

Gender

The terms ***sex*** and *gender* are often used interchangeably, but they are distinct concepts. Sex refers to the biological variation in human bodies (Wade & Ferree, 2019), and our sex category is assigned to us at birth, most often based on genital appearance. Gender, on the other hand, refers to the social traits we attach to members of each sex category—the expectations about masculinity that are associated with individuals categorized as male and the expectations about femininity that are associated with individuals categorized as female. A baby with a penis is dressed in primary colors, given trucks to play with, and is viewed as stronger than other babies. A baby with a vagina is dressed in pink ruffles, given dolls to play with, and is viewed as more sensitive than other babies.

Most individuals assigned to the female category identify as a girl or woman, and those in the male category identify as a boy or man. But that is not the case for all of us. Individuals who are **transgender** are those whose gender identify differs from their sex assignment. According to the Williams Institute (Herman, Flores, Brown, Wilson, & Conron, 2017), about 0.6 percent of U.S. adults identify as transgender, double the rate from 10 years prior. In addition, research

from the Centers for Disease Control (Johns et al., 2019) reports that about 2 percent of high schoolers identify as transgender. The category of transgender itself is multifaceted and includes substantial gender diversity within it. For example, a transgender person can be one who was assigned male at birth but identifies as a woman; was assigned male at birth but identifies as a transwoman; or is genderqueer or gender non-binary, meaning they do not identify as a man or a woman and instead embrace a more fluid gender identity. All of these individuals, as well as others, could identify as transgender.

Race

Desmond and Emirbayer (2020) define race as "a symbolic category, based on phenotype or ancestry and constructed according to specific social and historical contexts, that is misrecognized as a natural category." This can be broken down into three important points.

First, race is a symbolic category that is misrecognized as natural. The racial categories we use in the United States today are based on social convention, not biology. Although the phenotypical characteristics we associate with race—skin tone, hair texture, eye shape—are genetically determined, these characteristics do not map onto our racial categories in simple ways. For example, we associate dark skin with sub-Saharan Africa, but people with dark skin are indigenous to places around the globe, including Australia, Central America, and south Asia. And think of all the people who identify as Black who do not have dark skin. Race is socially constructed as a symbolic category to capture a shared history and sense of identity. It is not biologically determined.

The idea that race is symbolic rather than natural is also evident in the second point in Desmond and Emirbayer's (2020) definition of race—that race is based on phenotype or ancestry. That we use both phenotypical and ancestral criteria to classify racial groups, and that these criteria are sometimes in conflict with each other, challenges the idea that race is based in biology, reflecting innate natural differences between groups. For example, for much of American history, anyone with even a single Black ancestor was classified as Black, no matter their appearance. This so-called "one-drop rule" bolstered white supremacy and the supposed purity of whiteness by using ancestry, not phenotype, as the defining feature of blackness. In other contexts, racial categorization is based on phenotype. We see this, for example, in the way the federal government classifies Latinos. According to rules issued by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) that are followed by federal agencies, states, and many researchers, Hispanic is not a racial category and Hispanics can be of any race. This makes sense if one is using a phenotypical definition of race: Latinos represent the full range of skin tones, from very light to very dark. Yet, for many Latinos, it is their ancestral origins in Latin America that shape their racial identity, and most describe their race with their country of origin (e.g., Columbian or Dominican) or the panethnic Latino or Hispanic category. Most non-Latino Americans also

consider Hispanic or Latino its own racial group. Implicitly, the way the government separates Hispanic ethnicity from race uses phenotype as the criterion for racial categorization.

Finally, Desmond and Emirbayer's (2020) definition emphasizes that race is constructed according to specific social and historical contexts. The racial system in place today was created by Europeans in the 16th and 17th centuries. Prior to this, race was not a defining feature of social organization. Differences in phenotype existed, of course, and societies differentiated between in-groups and out-groups, but those groupings were not based on phenotype. Not only is race a relatively recent invention, even in the modern world, racial definitions vary across time and place. In the 19th century United States, for example, people from Ireland, Italy, and Greece were viewed as racially distinct from Anglo-Saxons. Over time, these distinct racial categories have merged, so that contemporary Americans consider anyone of European descent, including Irish, Italians, and Greeks, as white.

Similarly, panethnic categories like Latino and Asian American are distinctly American categories. Only those who have been socialized into the American understanding of race learn to identify in that way. This illustrates the process of **racialization**. Omi and Winant (1986) define racialization as "the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group" (p.111). In the contemporary United States, people from Latin America are racialized into a distinct group called "Latino," a racial grouping that did not exist 100 years ago and does not exist in any meaningful way in other contexts. Racialization is the process by which racial meanings are created, applied, and negotiated.

Social Class

Social class is a system that stratifies based on financial resources, level of education, occupation, and lifestyle. The most straight-forward way to determine social class is based on income. For example, households can be divided into five classes based on annual earnings: lower (households earning up to $28,083 in 2019), lower middle ($28,084-$53,502), middle ($53,503–$86,487), upper middle ($86,488–$142,500), and upper ($142,501 and higher). These income-based definitions are useful, but they leave out more subjective dimensions of social class that are also of interest to sociologists. For example, certain blue-collar occupations have traditionally been defined as working class, even though workers in those occupations can readily earn wages that put them in the upper middle class in terms of income. Sociologists are also interested in social class as an indicator of lifestyle. How one spends one's time, the kind of food one eats, and where one goes on vacation (if at all) can also be indicators of social class.

As you can see, social class is more complicated than simply how much one earns. As Reeves, Guyot, and Krause at Brookings (2018) put it, class can be

about "cash, credentials, or culture." Which measure one uses depends on the purpose of the investigation and the data available. Throughout the book, you'll notice that education level is used very frequently as a measure of social class in family studies. It is a more stable measure than income (which varies over the adult life course), and, unlike income, its value is not determined by location (e.g., $50,000 in Iowa goes a lot farther than it does in California, whereas a bachelor's degree is a bachelor's degree no matter where you live). You'll also learn that social class, as measured by education level, is one of the strongest predictors of family patterns. This is not because people in different class locations have different family values. Rather, it is because economic stability helps to reinforce family stability.

Sexuality

The fourth structure of inequality that shapes families is sexuality. Sexuality refers to how we think about ourselves and others as sexual beings. Like gender, race, and class, sexuality is a concept that is more complex than it might appear on the surface. For example, the idea that sexuality could be an identity did not emerge until the late 19th century. At this time, sexual behavior between men was problematized, and the category of homosexuality (*homo* is prefix from Greek meaning *same*) was invented to describe men who engaged in these behaviors. Heterosexuality was defined at the same time to refer to those who engaged in sexual behavior with the other gender (*hetero* a prefix meaning *different*). Thus, although the full variety of human sexual behaviors has existed since the beginning of time, it is only 130 years ago that these behaviors were redefined as a foundation for an identity.

Today, the term **LGBTQ** is used as an umbrella term to describe sexual and gender minorities: those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. (Although transgender is a gender identity and transgender people can have any sexual identity, transgender is often included in this umbrella term for historical and political reasons). The terminology around **sexual identity** is rapidly changing and, by the time you read this, there may be newer terms in use. This underscores the fact that sexuality is socially constructed and that there is a fluidity in the meanings we attach to sexual behaviors and attractions.

Structures of Inequality

The sociological perspective analyzes gender, race, social class, and sexuality as structures of inequality that exist on the individual, interactional, and institutional levels (Risman, 2018). Thus, these are not simply individual traits; they are also social systems that shape how we define our identities, how we interact with each other, and how social institutions, like the family, are organized. Within these social systems, some groups have access to more resources, opportunities, and social value than others.

For example, social interactions are patterned by gender in that men talk more and interrupt more often than women. People of color are often asked "what are you?" or "where are you from?" These **microaggressions** are defined by psychologists Derald Wing Sue and Lisa Spanierman (2020) as "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership" (p. 36). These interactions also create and reinforce our identities. For example, a Black Dominican interviewed by sociologist Clara E. Rodríguez (2000) describes how most people perceive him as Black, even though he is also Latino. When asked, he describes himself as Black because it is easier to go along with what others expect. His racial identity is shaped by the perceptions and expectations of others.

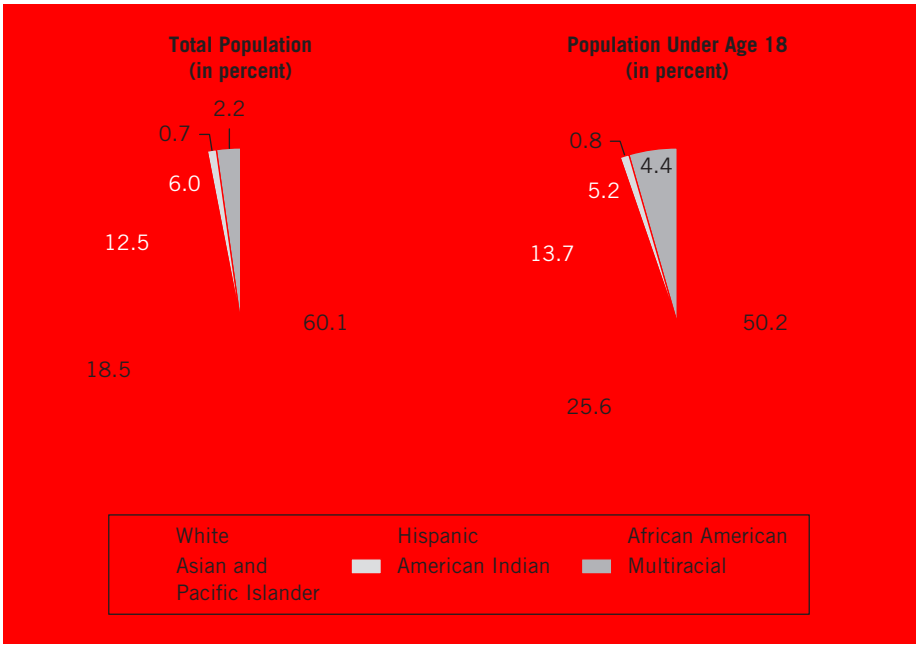
Gender, race, social class, and sexuality also operate on the institutional level. The examples are endless. White households in the United States have 13 times as much wealth as Black households and 10 times as much wealth as Hispanic households (Kochhar & Fry, 2014), a gap that has grown since the Great Recession. Same-sex marriage has been legal throughout the United States only since 2015. Currently, in more than half the states, there are no legal protections against discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations for LGBTQ people (Movement Advancement Project, 2020). Data from the Williams Institute show that LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in the homeless population and that the most common reason for their homelessness was due to family rejection because of their gender or sexual identity (Durso & Gates, 2012). Daughters in families are often give more chores to do than sons (Raley & Bianchi, 2006), and women's low pay relative to that of men increases the likelihood that single-mother families will live in poverty.

A Demographic Snapshot of the U.S. Population

Understanding American families means having an accurate picture of the American population more generally. Here, we will take a brief look at six population characteristics that have implications for families, which we will discuss in more detail in later chapters. First is the racial-ethnic makeup of the U.S. population (Figure 1.1).

The chart on the left of Figure 1.1 shows that approximately 60 percent of Americans are white and that Hispanics make up the largest minority group at 18.5 percent of the population. African Americans are 12.5 percent of the U.S. population, Asians and Pacific Islanders make up 6 percent, people who identify as multiracial are 2.2 percent, and Native Americans are about 1 percent of the U.S. population. The chart on the right of Figure 1.1 shows the population younger than age 18. This younger generation of Americans is even more racially diverse. White people make up about half of the population younger than age 18, with Hispanics accounting for 25.6 percent and African Americans 13.7 percent. Americans younger than age 18 are also twice as likely as the general population to

Figure 1.1 U.S. Population by Race and Ethnicity, 2019

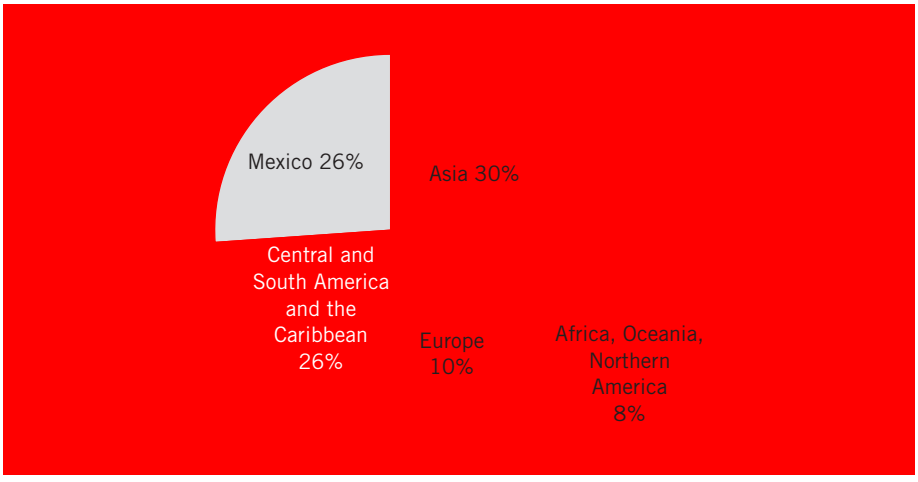


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2020b and 2020c

be multiracial, although at 4.4 percent, they are still a relatively small group. That the youngest generation of Americans is more racially and ethnically diverse than older Americans gives us some idea of what the future will hold—an increasingly racially diverse population.

Growing diversity is also evident in patterns of immigration. In 2018, 13.7 percent of the population was foreign born, similar to the percentages at the turn of the 20th century (Budiman, 2020) and lower than the peak of 14.8 percent in 1890. What has changed is the countries of origin for these immigrants. In 1900, 86 percent of the foreign-born population residing in the United States had been born in Europe, primarily eastern and southern Europe (Gibson & Lennon, 2011). In 2019, as shown in Figure 1.2, the largest groups of immigrants were from Mexico (26 percent) and countries throughout Asia (30 percent). Although the size of the immigrant population is large, the immigrant population is not spread evenly across the United States. More than a quarter of the foreign-born population lives in a single state—California—and in 35 states, less than 10 percent of the population was born outside of the United States (Grieco et al., 2012). Three in four immigrants living in the United States are authorized to live and work here, and 45 percent are naturalized U.S. citizens (Budiman, 2020). Since 2007, unauthorized immigration has declined 15 percent.

Figure 1.2 Foreign-Born Population in the United States by Place of Birth, 2019



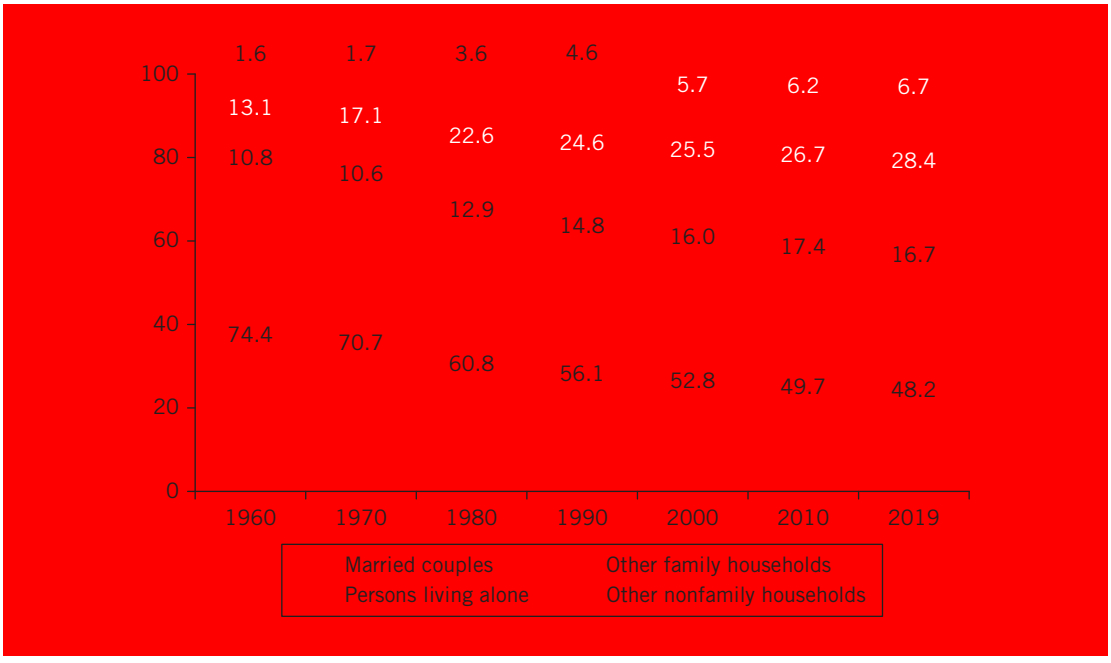
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2020d

Another demographic characteristic that influences families is the age structure of the population. In 2019, 16 percent of the population was 65 years of age and older (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020c). The Census Bureau projects that by 2030, this will increase to 20 percent, or one in five Americans. More Americans are also living to the oldest ages. This has implications for intergenerational caregiving, extended family relationships, health care, and government programs like Medicare and Social Security. Like the rest of the population, older Americans are becoming more racially diverse. Chapter 10 will focus on the implications of the aging population for families in more detail.

The growth in income inequality over the past several decades also has implications for families. Since 1967, household income inequality has increased 22 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020e). Only the top 20 percent of households has seen their share of total income increase; the other 80 percent are earning a lower percentage of aggregate U.S. income (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020f). You will see throughout this book that many family behaviors—such as marriage, childrearing, divorce, and cohabitation—are differentiated by social class. As inequality continues to increase, we will likely see growing differentiation in family patterns as well.

Figure 1.3 shows how household composition has changed since 1960. Married-couple households went from 74 to 48 percent of all households. Other family households, which includes mostly single-parent families, increased to 17 percent; households consisting of people living alone more than doubled to

Figure 1.3 Households by Type, 1960–2019

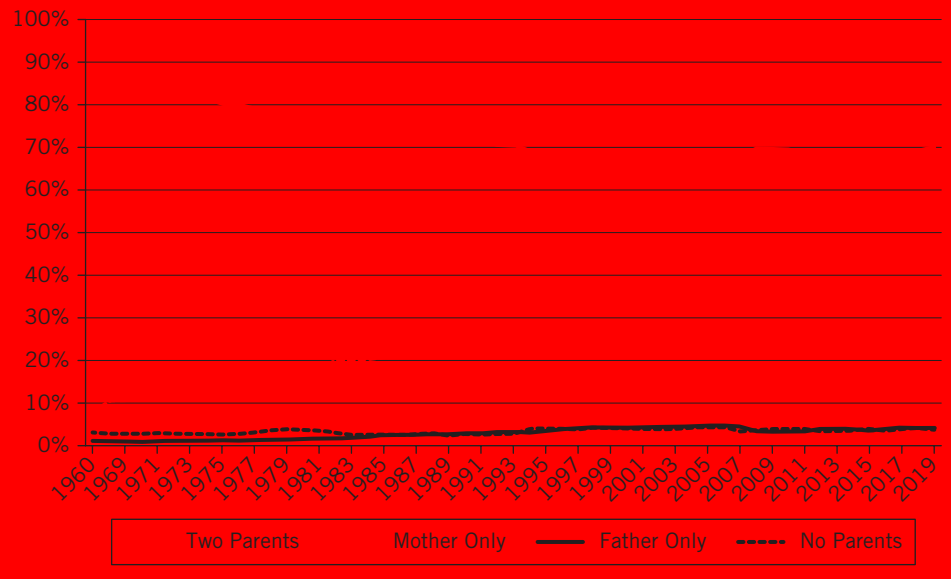


Sources: Rawlings et al., 1979; U.S. Census Bureau, 2019b; and Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013

28 percent; and other nonfamily households, which includes cohabiting couples without children and people living with roommates, grew to 6.7 percent. In these changes, we can see the increasing diversity in living arrangements and family types even as marriage remains most common.

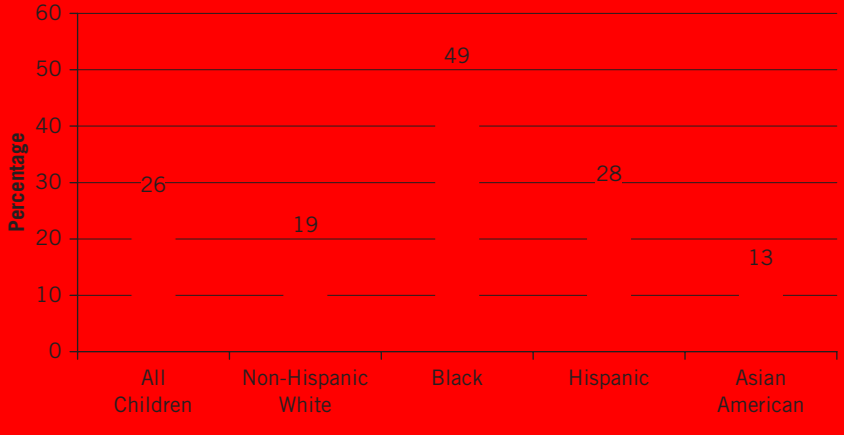
Finally, Figure 1.4 shows children's living arrangements. Most children (70 percent) live with two parents. This is lower than it was in 1960 when 88 percent of children lived with two parents. Of the remaining children, 21 percent are currently living with their mother only, 4 percent with their father only, and 4 percent with neither parent. This latter category has remained consistent since 1960, and although the proportion of children living only with their fathers has quadrupled, it still represents a small minority of children. Most of the decline in children living with two parents can be explained by the increase in children living with their mothers. Figure 1.5 looks at the percentage of children living with only one parent by race-ethnicity. About half of Black children are living with one parent, compared with 28 percent of Hispanic children, 19 percent of non-Hispanic white children, and 13 percent of Asian American children.

Figure 1.4 Living Arrangements of Children, 1960–2019



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2019c

Figure 1.5 Children Living With One Parent, 2019



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a

Looking Ahead

This text will introduce you to the sociological perspective on families' with a focus on families in the United States. Three themes are integrated throughout. First, you will learn about the ways that families in the United States have changed, but you will also learn how current family patterns are rooted in the past. These continuities help us understand American families in their full complexity. Second, you will learn about the diversity of family structures and processes that exist in the United States. This text treats family diversity as a given and explores how a family's social location in gender, race, social class, and sexual hierarchies shapes their opportunities and experiences. Finally, you will learn to apply your sociological imagination to the study of families. You will analyze families within their social contexts and understand how sociologists use social scientific methods and theories to understand the family as an institution.

In the next chapter, you will begin to see how family changes that took place in the 19th century have set the stage for what we are experiencing today. The shift to an industrial economy led to lower fertility rates and changing definitions of marriage. The romantic dyad became the core of the family, increasing expectations for intimacy and personal happiness. These high expectations, in turn, increased the risk of divorce and, more recently, the incidence of cohabitation. The redefinition of marriage as a relationship based on intimacy, attraction, and personal happiness also set the stage for legal recognition of same-sex couples.

At the same time that these interpersonal changes were taking place, changes in the economy also helped to change family life. The relative economic stability of the 1950s gave way to the instability of the 1970s and beyond. The disappearance of well-paid manufacturing jobs led to stagnation and decline in men's wages, and more women got jobs to support their families. This reduced women's dependence on men, helped to create more gender egalitarian relationships, and made it easier for women to support themselves without being married.

Expanding educational opportunities for young people—to high school in the early years of the 20th century and to college in the later years—has also changed family formation. The rise of the independent life stage, when young people live on their own, without parents or spouses, often hundreds of miles from where they grew up, has also helped to reduce parents' influence on the romantic behaviors and choices of their children (Rosenfeld, 2007). Young adults are left to date, mate, and marry whomever they choose, relatively free from the familial constraints faced by earlier generations of young people. This is not to say that parental influence has disappeared, nor that structural constraints no longer shape how we fall in love (which you will read about in Chapter 5), but compared with earlier generations, young people today have much more choice in their partnerships. As a result, untraditional matches, including interracial, interreligious, and same-sex relationships, are on the rise.

These are just a few examples of how today's family patterns and ideologies are linked to those of the past. They also show how family patterns result from

what is going on in the broader context, although this context does not affect all families in the same ways. Studying families from a sociological perspective provides insights that historical, psychological, or theological perspectives cannot. Sociologists study families as an institution embedded in social context. Learning about the sociology of families will help you understand the variety of ideological, political, and economic forces that shape families and the opportunities available to them. Although sociologists focus on these social forces, we must keep in mind that these forces have a real and direct influence on individual lives. By studying families from a sociological perspective, you will begin to recognize these interconnections between individuals and society.

Chapter 2 discusses how family is defined and the implications of these definitions. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the theories and methods that sociologists use to study families. Chapters 4 through 10 focus on specific areas of family life: the transition to adulthood; marriage and cohabitation; divorce and relationship dissolution; childhood; parenting; family work; and the family lives of older adults. Chapter 11 discusses family violence, and Chapter 12 pulls together the major themes of the book and asks you to consider the future of families. By the time you finish this text, you will have a deeper understanding of contemporary U.S. families and how the sociological perspective can be used to understand them.

Family change has always been a feature of U.S. families.

Sociology is the scientific study of institutions. Sociologists who study families consider norms, roles, patterns, and social context.

Today's families are characterized by both change from and continuity with families in the past.

Families in different social locations have differential access to resources, which creates family diversity and inequality.

Gender, race, social class, and sexuality are structures of inequality that shape the opportunities and resources available to families.

U.S. demographic patterns, including racial-ethnic structure, immigration, age structure, income inequality, and household composition, create the context for contemporary families.

CHAPTER

2 Defining Family

- Explain how the separate spheres ideology contrasted with the reality of American families in the 19th century
- Summarize the four approaches to defining family
- Compare exclusionist, moderate, and inclusionist definitions of family
- Describe the significance of extended families to modern American families

What is a family? This seemingly simple question lacks a simple answer. Does it mean a nuclear family—a married couple with children, all living in the same household? Does it include extended family members? And what about a couple without children—are they a family? Neither scholars nor the general public have expressed a clear consensus on who or what makes up a family. Although almost all Americans agree that the prototypical image of husband, wife, and children is a family (Powell, Bolzendahl, Geist, & Steelman, 2010; Weigel, 2008), many also agree that single parents and their children, LGBTQ couples and their children, extended families, and married couples without children also count as family. In fact, most Americans agree that what is most important to families is loving and caring relationships, not any particular family form (Weigel, 2008).

Defining family is not simply an academic exercise. It has implications for custody, immigration, access to health insurance, medical decision making, inheritance, and many other real-life concerns. For example, immigration policy prioritizes family reunification in assigning visas, and spouses and children are given priority over other family members. Legal spouses are exempt from paying estate taxes when a partner dies, but long-term cohabiting partners are not. A narrow

focus on nuclear families—an adult couple and their children—also obscures much family life, particularly how it is experienced by people of color, LGBTQ individuals, and people living in poverty, all of whom have rich relationships in extended and nonkin family systems (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2012).

This chapter begins with a description of what Dorothy Smith (1993) has called the **Standard North American Family (SNAF)**, a family image that emerged in the 19th century and that continues to have profound influence on how families are defined today. Next, I present four different approaches to defining family and then consider how our ideas about family shift when we move extended families to the center of analysis. Throughout, we will explore how family definitions are shaped by race, social class, and sexuality. We will also consider how family definitions have changed over time and how they continue to prioritize marriage and children.

The Standard North American Family and the Ideology of Separate Spheres

When asked to describe a traditional family, most Americans imagine a married heterosexual couple with children. The husband is employed, and his earnings are used to support the family. The wife's primary duty is caring for home, children, and husband, although she may also earn some income. Dorothy Smith (1993) used the term SNAF to capture this image, one that is laden with ideological codes used to frame our family experiences. Even though most of us recognize that many families do not actually look like this, the image maintains powerful ideological sway.

The family ideals expressed in the SNAF image—breadwinning husband and homemaking wife—started to take hold in the United States in the 19th century. Before then, family codes looked different. Households were large, and they were highly integrated into and regulated by the small agrarian communities of which they were a part. As you will learn in later chapters, early American views on marriage and childrearing were much more utilitarian than they would become in the 19th and 20th centuries. All household members were household workers—the economic survival of the household required it. Men planted crops and tended livestock; some men also worked in a trade such as blacksmithing. Household survival also depended on the labor of women. Women tended gardens, cared for smaller animals, worked in the fields, prepared meals, put up food for winter, and sewed and cared for clothing. Women spent very little time tending to children.

Children were also put to work from a young age, starting to assist their parents with gender-specialized tasks by age seven or eight. It was also common, particularly among the Puritans, for parents to send their children to live with other families as servants for a period of time. This was intended to teach children

Idealized image of a Colonial New England white family, as depicted in 1876.

industriousness and respect for authority, the most important childrearing values of the time. Households were legally and explicitly patriarchal, with the male head of household owning the labor of those within it. Few institutions outside of the family existed, so families were responsible for the education, health care, religious instruction, and vocational training of their members.

Over the course of the 19th century, American society experienced significant social change. Between 1810 and 1900, the share of the labor force working in the manufacturing sector grew almost sevenfold, and the rural population declined from 93 to 60 percent of the U.S. population. The end of slavery led to the dismantling of plantation agriculture, which gave way to sharecropping, and by the early decades of the 20th century, millions of African Americans abandoned the agricultural South to migrate to the industrial North, what is called the Great Migration. By 1920, more Americans lived in cities than in rural areas, and more people worked in industry than in agriculture (U.S. Census Bureau, 1975). Fertility also declined dramatically during this period. Women born in the mid-1800s tended to give birth to more than five children. By the end of the 19th century, women,

on average, were giving birth to just over three (Jones & Tertilt, 2006). In addition, families spread apart as young adults left the farms and moved to cities to find jobs in the growing manufacturing and trade sector. The expansion of public schooling in the early 20th century also helped to extend childhood and adolescence and to create a distinct youth culture.

It is during this period of industrialization in the 19th century that our contemporary ideas about "traditional" American families emerged. Most significantly, this is when the **separate spheres ideology**, represented in the SNAF image, took hold. This ideology held that the public sphere of work and the private sphere of home were independent realms of existence, the former characterized by masculine ideals of competition and individualism and the latter by feminine ideals of nurturance and care. Men devoted their days to working in the market economy, and women spent theirs caring for children and the home. No longer seen as work, women's homemaking was redefined as an idealized expression of love.

Library of Congress

Women working in a factory in 1895 Massachusetts. Working-class women were not able to live up to the separate spheres ideal.

Although this idealized division of labor was not the reality for most of the population, it was—and is—presented as universal. The experience of a small, privileged segment of the population was generalized to all, ignoring class, race, and regional differences in families. The reality is that many women continued to work in productive labor to support their families even in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This was true especially in rural areas and among unmarried working-class white women, married immigrant women, and women of color. In 1900, greater than 40 percent of African American women were employed as were 19 percent of Asian American women (Amott & Matthaei, 1996) and 44 percent of unmarried white women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

Applying a class lens to the ideology of separate spheres is an important reminder that family diversity emerges because families are positioned in different social locations. The industrial economy developed in different parts of the United States at different times, and not everyone was granted the same access to this new sector. As a result,

the family changes that accompanied industrialization also varied across class and racial-ethnic groups. For example, until the Great Migration, most African American families continued to live in the agricultural South. As a result, their family patterns, including higher fertility and women's involvement in productive labor, reflected these agrarian conditions. The same was true for white rural families in the Midwest and Latino families in the Southwest.

The separate spheres ideology also ignores the reality of the many connections between the public and private spheres. Far from separate, they are highly integrated. Some men could devote their energies to breadwinning because they had a wife to take care of responsibilities at home. Some women could devote themselves to caregiving only because they were dependent on the wages of their husbands and the labor of other women to support their domesticity. Remember, separate spheres ideology emerged long before modern conveniences like off-the-rack clothing, washing machines, and refrigeration. Clothes had to be sewn and laundered by hand, and food had to be prepared from scratch. Middle-class women relied on the labor of working-class women, including European immigrants in the Northeast, Mexican Americans in the Southwest, and African Americans in the South, to get this work done. By idealizing the private sphere, this ideology made invisible much of the hard labor required to maintain white feminine domesticity.

The separation of work and home into two distinct spheres was an illusion in the 19th century when it first emerged, and it is an illusion that continues today. We can see this in the structure of the labor market, which assumes that workers do not have family responsibilities. A good worker is one who can be at work whenever a boss or client needs them. A good worker has no laundry to do, meals to prepare, or children to care for. A good worker puts work above all else. These expectations are fully rooted in the ideology of separate spheres: The only way these expectations can be met is if the worker has a full-time caregiver at home. The illusion of separate spheres is one reason why U.S. workers have no guarantee of paid family leave and why so many parents are struggling to balance their work and home responsibilities. The institution of work continues to be governed by the ideology of separate spheres and has not adjusted to contemporary family realities.

Defining Family: Four Approaches

Although the SNAF image offers a limited understanding of the family institution, coming up with an alternative definition that captures the complexity of family life is challenging. Family can be defined in many ways, and sociologists have no agreement on the best way to do so. A useful starting point for our discussion is an influential definition of the family that was developed by sociologists Ernest W. Burgess and Harvey J. Locke in the mid-20th century, a time when

the heterosexual breadwinner–homemaker family was at its peak:

> The family may now be defined as a group of persons united by ties of marriage, blood, or adoption; constituting a single household; interacting and communicating with each other in their respective social roles of husband and wife, mother and father, son and daughter, brother and sister; and creating and maintaining a common culture. (Burgess & Locke, 1945, p. 2)

Burgess and Locke's description includes four distinct approaches to defining family, each of which is still in use by sociologists today: (1) **structural**, (2) **household-based**, (3) **role-based**, and (4) **interactionist**. Let's explore each of these in turn.

1. Family as Structure

First, family is "a group of persons united by ties of marriage, blood, or adoption." This represents a *structural* approach to defining family, focusing on formal legal relationships between family members. This is the narrowest way to define families, and it is one that continues to have wide influence in the United States. Most research on families, including data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau, uses a structural definition, and legal and blood ties are the key to what many people consider "real" families. In addition, widespread benefits accrue to those who fall under this definition, from inheritance to immigration to insurance. A structural definition of family is exclusive in that it limits family members to those occupying those legal roles; a long-time cohabiting couple, for example, is not included, although a married same-sex couple is.

Both the symbolic and the practical influence of this structural definition of family is seen in the privileged place that marriage continues to hold in American families. Despite changing marriage patterns over the past few decades (which you will learn more about in Chapter 5), marriage continues to bestow legitimacy to relationships. Not only is "marital status a factor in determining or receiving benefits, rights, and privileges" in more than 1,100 federal laws (General Accounting Office, 2004), but marriage holds symbolic value as well. For example, some same-sex couples report that their coworkers and relatives finally recognize the legitimacy and seriousness of their relationships now that they are legally married (Kimport, 2014).

Marriage and family are so closely intertwined in our culture that it is difficult for couples who aren't married to be seen as legitimate families. Some progressive activists, in fact, have argued *against* same-sex marriage for exactly this reason, in that it continues to elevate marriage as the most legitimate family form. Instead of expanding marital privilege to include same-sex couples, they argue, we should dismantle marital privilege all together. In essence, these activists are arguing against a structural definition of family.

2. Family as Household

The second component of the Burgess and Locke (1945) definition of family is that family members "constitut[e] a single household." The terms *family* and *household* are often used interchangeably in the United States, but they are two distinct concepts. A **household** consists of all persons sharing a residential unit, such as a free-standing house or an apartment. Households may consist of nuclear families, multigenerational families, cohabiting couples, friends living together as housemates, or some combination thereof. You will recall from Figure 1.3 in Chapter 1 that approximately one-third of households are considered nonfamily households, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau—consisting of a person living alone or living with other people to whom they are not related by marriage, blood, or adoption. In fact, the fastest growing household type in the United States is a person living alone. Extremely rare until the late 20th century—and illegal in some towns during the Colonial period—28 percent of households in 2019 consist of one person, more than double the rate in 1960 (U.S. Census, 2019c).

Although the Burgess and Locke (1945) definition limits a family to a single household, families may in fact cross households. Consider a child whose parents are divorced. As joint custody has become more common (you will learn more about this in Chapter 6), children are likely to spend significant time in each parent's household. Yet, household-based definitions limit the child's family to just one. And what about a person living alone? Is this person without a family? Not at all—they are likely to have parents, siblings, extended family, and close friends considered to be family. Some even have long-term romantic partners from whom they have decided to live apart. Called **living apart together**, or LAT relationships for short, they have not been the focus of much research in the United States, reflecting a household bias in the definition of families. Estimates suggest that 7 percent to 10 percent of the population in Australia, North America, and Western Europe are in LAT relationships (Connidis, Borell, & Karlsson, 2017). In the United States, this represents 35 percent of individuals who are not cohabiting or married (Strohm, Seltzer, Cochran, & Mays, 2009).

The common conflation of family and household in the United States reflects our bias toward the nuclear family. When we disentangle these two concepts, more complex family meanings emerge. For example, in her classic ethnographic study of African American families living in a poor Midwestern community that she called The Flats, Stack (1974) found that,

> [T]he "household" and its group composition was not a meaningful unit to isolate for analysis of family life in The Flats. A resident in The Flats who eats in one household may sleep in another, and contribute resources to yet another. He may consider himself a member of all three households. . . . The family network is diffused over several kin-based households, and fluctuations in household composition do not significantly affect cooperative familial arrangements. (p. 31)

Transnational families offer another example of a family type that transcends the household; in fact, these families transcend national borders. Whether it is due to legal restrictions, concern about the safety of the immigration crossing, or economic need, millions of families are split across two countries (Foner & Dreby, 2011). This is certainly true for extended families, but it is also true for nuclear families. A husband may leave a spouse and children in his home country and migrate for work. A widowed or divorced mother may leave her children living with their grandmother for the same reason. Like other families who transcend households, transnational families highlight the limitations of a family definition that confines families to a single household.

3. Family Roles

The third part of the Burgess and Locke (1945) definition states that family members are "interacting and communicating with each other in their respective social roles of husband and wife, mother and father, son and daughter, brother and sister." As you learned in the first chapter, family sociologists are interested in how individuals enact social roles and in the scripts associated with these roles. This third part of the definition acknowledges this sociological focus. How one behaves as a family member is not entirely up to the individual. Each of us is strongly influenced by the social roles we occupy, and the scripts attached to these roles shape how family members behave and how they interact with each other. For example, the script for the husband role includes an expectation that he is the head of the household and that he is the main economic provider for the family. Most men continue to feel accountable to this expectation, and this is one of the reasons why men focus on wage earning rather than caregiving.

A limitation in the way that Burgess and Locke (1945) describe these social roles is the definition's focus on gender differentiation, heterosexuality, and the **nuclear family**. The husband role exists in opposition to the wifely role. The role of a son differs from that of a daughter. Although it is true that gendered expectations for spouses and for children are still strongly embedded in our families, which you will learn more about throughout the book, these specific family roles are not inherent to families, which the definition implies. One need not have a husband and a wife or a son and a daughter to have a family. And many families include roles beyond this limited list, such as extended family members and stepfamily members.

4. Family as Interaction: Doing Family

The final part of the definition states that through interaction and communication, family members are "creating and maintaining a common culture." This emphasizes the ways that families are actively created through interaction, what can be described as an interactionist approach to defining family. Sometimes called "doing family," this approach recognizes that families are symbolic entities that

gain meaning from shared activities and emotional attachment. As Christopher Carrington (1999) describes it, "what or who constitutes a family derives from whether the participants engage in a consistent and relatively reciprocal pattern of loving and caring activities and understand themselves to be bound to . . . other family members" (p. 5).

The interactionist approach to defining family argues that families are best understood as a pattern of shared activities and relationships rather than the fulfillment of structurally prescribed roles. It is in the process of sharing meals, celebrating holidays, and investing emotion, time, money, and other resources into a relationship that one becomes a family; it is not automatic, but it is created through these activities. Unlike definitions that focus on legal relationships, shared households, and family roles, interactionist definitions of family focus on the expressive (love and care) and instrumental (doing things for each other) activities that take place among groups of two or more people, even in the absence of formal family roles or legal ties.

Defining Family: A Summary

The Burgess and Locke (1945) definition of family, although limited when considered in full, effectively highlights four different ways to understand the family as a social institution:

1. *Structural definitions* focus on marriage, blood, and legally adoptive relationships.
2. *Household-based definitions* consider family members living in a single household.
3. *Role-based definitions* focus on family roles and their associated scripts.
4. *Interactionist definitions* highlight the ways that families are actively created through interaction and relationship.

The definition one uses will often depend on goals and circumstances. For a demographer at the U.S. Census Bureau who is interested in examining how family patterns have changed over time, a household-based structural definition might work best. If one is interested in the networks of care among extended families, then an interactionist definition would be more appropriate.

What this emphasizes is that the family is "as much idea as thing" (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990, p. 163). And how that idea gets expressed will shift over time, place, and situation, not only for different people but also for the same person in different circumstances. It is not uncommon, for example, for individuals to use structural or role-based definitions when defining family in the abstract and to use interactionist definitions when thinking about their own families (Powell et al., 2010). Similarly, in his research with gay and lesbian families, Carrington (1999)

found that many of his respondents rejected narrow structural definitions of family and instead described family as a "way of behaving" (p. 5), which is a more interactionist understanding. At the same time, the same participants sometimes embraced structural definitions to advocate for gay and lesbian inclusion in them, such as with same-sex marriage. Like Carrington's respondents, I also define family differently in different circumstances. I am a family demographer, and my research uses structural and household-based definitions of family. Yet, when I teach about families and talk about families to a general audience, I tend to emphasize doing family, family as it is created through interaction, because it reflects the complexity of family life as it is actually lived by most Americans.

How Americans Define Family

It is clear to most observers that who counts as a family has changed over time. The narrow focus on a married heterosexual couple and their children has expanded to include other family types, including LGBTQ families, cohabiting couples, stepfamilies, and single parents and their children. The rhetoric around same-sex marriage has highlighted the competing definitions held by Americans, with some insisting that the only legitimate family is a married heterosexual couple and their children, whereas others insist that love makes a family, regardless of who is in it.

Sociologist Brian Powell and his colleagues wanted to answer the question "who counts as family?" and interviewed a nationally representative sample of Americans to find out how they define family, "who they believe fits under the abstract umbrella of 'family'" (Powell et al., 2010, p. 5). They found that Americans tend to fall into three categories—exclusionists, moderates, and inclusionists.

The exclusionists expressed the strictest definition of family, basing their ideas on structural and role-based understandings of family: "A family is a married couple with children" (Powell et al., 2010, p. 41), one respondent stated simply. This category of respondents identified heterosexual marriage and biological or adopted children as key features of a family; they were especially resistant to counting same-sex couples as a family. An analysis of their language use during the interviews found that they used role-based and gender-specific language like "husband" and "wife" much more frequently than other respondents. For exclusionists, marriage and family were one; as Powell and his colleagues write about their interviews with this group, "The transcripts of our interviews are replete with phrases such as 'the marriage vow,' 'the marriage covenant,' 'ceremonial arrangements,' 'legal marriage,' 'legal connection,' and 'legally binding'" (Powell et al., 2010, p. 38). Exclusionists made up approximately 45 percent of the sample in 2003, 38 percent in 2006, and 34 percent in 2010 (Powell, Bolzendahl, Geist, & Steelman, 2015).

Like the exclusionists, people in the moderate group also relied on structural definitions, but moderates incorporated more interactionist ideas about family as

well. For most moderates, who made up approximately one-third of the sample in all three study years, children make the family, regardless of the gender and marital status of their parents. Moderates said things like "I think you need children to be a real family" (Powell et al., 2010, p. 48) and "As soon as there are kids involved, then it's a family, whether they're both same sex or not" (p. 50). Many moderates also "emphasized expressive qualities . . . such as love, caring, and emotional bonds, or instrumental qualities . . . such as taking care of each other, buying a house, and earning income" (Powell et al., 2010, p. 51), illustrating a more interactionist approach to defining family.

The moderates differed from exclusionists and inclusionists in the ambivalence that was evident in their sometimes contradictory views. Initially, they said marriage must be between a man and a woman, yet over the course of the interview, they also expressed the idea that a family is "just two people that love each other" (Powell et al., 2010, p. 52). Recognizing these contradictions, moderates became more inclusive in their definitions as they reflected on what makes a family.

An example of this shift comes from the parent of one of my former students. When I teach sociology of families, I ask students to replicate the Powell et al. (2010) study by asking their friends and family members to fill out the survey portion of the study, identifying which of 11 living arrangements count as family. Several years ago, one student's mother provided mostly exclusive definitions of family—she considered neither same-sex couples nor cohabiting couples with children to be real families. A few hours after filling out the survey, the mother called the student back, saying, "I want to change my answers." Upon reflection, she realized that she did believe that same-sex couples and cohabiting couples with children count as families. Like the moderates in Powell et al.'s (2010) study, her unexamined definitions of family became more inclusive after a bit of introspection. This isn't to say that this process happens for all moderates, but for those whose responses reflected a tension between structural and interactionist definitions, they tended to move toward inclusion (Powell et al., 2010).

The final category was the inclusionists, who tended to rely primarily on interactionist definitions of family. Respondents in this category were less concerned about roles and formal legal ties and more concerned with the love and commitment between family members. One respondent said, "A living arrangement doesn't make a family, period. How the people treat each other makes a family" (Powell et al., 2010, p. 55). Another said, "Two people living together who love each other. . . . It's got to have love in there to make a family" (p. 56), and "If you depend on each other to survive—well, if you're physically, mentally, or financially dependent on someone else—then I would consider them a family" (p. 58). Inclusionists frequently used words like "commitment," "responsibility," "love," and "emotional," which set them apart from other respondents. Over the seven years of the study, the proportion of the sample that was inclusive rose from 25 percent to 33 percent, with most of that change occurring between 2003 and 2006 (Powell et al., 2015).

Jose Luis Magana/Associated Press

The argument that "love is love" represents an inclusive definition of family.

Powell et al.'s (2010) study highlights the contradictory, complex, changing, and nuanced ways that Americans define the family. Some are firm in their beliefs, whereas others are more tenuous. Across all three categories, we see how Americans use structure, households, roles, and interactions to delineate who makes a family and who does not. We also see how definitions are shaped by social location—several factors emerged as important correlates of whether respondents were exclusive, moderate, or inclusive (Powell et al., 2010). One of these factors is gender, with men being more exclusive and women more inclusive. Another is age, with almost 80 percent of respondents younger than 30 years of age falling in the moderate or inclusive categories and almost 60 percent of those 65 or older being exclusive. We also see differences by level of education, with more than half of those with a high-school degree expressing exclusive definitions, whereas those with a college degree were about evenly split among the three categories. Few racial differences emerged, although there was a clear rural–urban divide, with rural residents being more exclusive. Finally, two-thirds of religious fundamentalists were exclusive as were half of those who did not have any gays or lesbians in their social networks.

Extended Families

The nuclear family—parents and their children—is the prototypical family form in the United States (Weigel, 2008). Even as Americans are starting to expand their definitions of family, moving away from a narrow husband–wife–children definition, most of these expansions are variations on the nuclear family, such as a single parent and his or her children or a cohabiting couple with children. What tends to be obscured in these nuclear family ideologies are the complex networks of extended family members that are most resonant for many people. From childcare to economic support to social support, most Americans are deeply embedded in extended family networks. In fact, most of us couldn't get by without them.

For example, more than 40 percent of children in the United States younger than 5 years of age are regularly cared for by a relative, most often a grandparent, while their parents work (Laughlin, 2013). More than a quarter of respondents to a national survey reported that they had exchanged financial, housework, or transportation help with kin in the recent past (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004). In 2016, over 28 million Americans lived in households with three or more generations (Cohn & Passel, 2018). And older adults in need of assistance are cared for most often by family members. These examples illustrate the importance of extended families to family well-being even though much of this care is unseen and unacknowledged.

The term *extended family* generally applies to kin other than spouses and dependent children. It can include four types of relationships (Johnson, 2000), which are often referred to collectively as *kinship*. First are *lineal* relationships formed between direct descendants, such as grandparents, parents, and grandchildren. Second are *collateral* kin, to whom one is related by blood but not in a direct line, such as siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles. Third are *in-law* relationships created through marriage. Finally, many people have family ties with those to whom they are not related by blood or marriage, what is variously called *fictive kin*, *chosen kin*, or *voluntary kin*. This would include godparents, informally adopted children, and long-time friends who are considered part of the family.

Several demographic changes are raising the visibility and importance of extended family relationships in the United States. First, longer life expectancies mean that three- and even four-generation families are not uncommon. Uhlenberg (1996) found that children born in the year 2000 are more likely to have a grandparent alive at age 20 than children born in the year 1900 were to have a mother alive at the same age. People are not only living longer but healthier as well, which increases their availability to be an active part of the lives of younger kin (you will read more about this in Chapter 10).

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Most Americans are deeply integrated into extended families.

At the same time that longer life expectancies increase the availability of intergenerational ties, lower fertility results in fewer collateral relationships with similarly aged kin. In the early 20th century, the average woman had more than three children. That figure had been reduced to 1.7 by 2018 (Livingston, 2019a). This not only means fewer siblings but fewer cousins, aunts, and uncles as well (although those aunts and uncles are also living to older ages). Demographers have come to describe the U.S. age structure as a **beanpole**—long and thin "with more family generations alive but with fewer members in each generation" (Bengston, 2001, p. 5).

Third, lower marriage rates and higher levels of relationship instability mean that extended family relationships may come to overshadow nuclear family ties for well-being and support over the life course (Bengston, 2001). **Multipartner fertility**, when an adult has children with more than one partner, also expands the pool of potential kin for children who can create connections with each parent's family networks. However, more research is needed to know whether and how these relationships are activated and maintained over the long term (Furstenberg, 2014).

Finally, immigration to the United States from countries and regions that have more established traditions of extended family relations may also help to increase the role of extended families in the United States. *Compadrazgo* relationships among Latinos, filial piety among Asians, and West African kin patterns that place

a high value on extended family relationships continue to influence the family experiences of people of color living in the United States, particularly among first and second generations. Over time, more research will be needed on how their extended family traditions are integrated into, and adapted to, the U.S. context.

Diversity and Inequality Among Extended Families

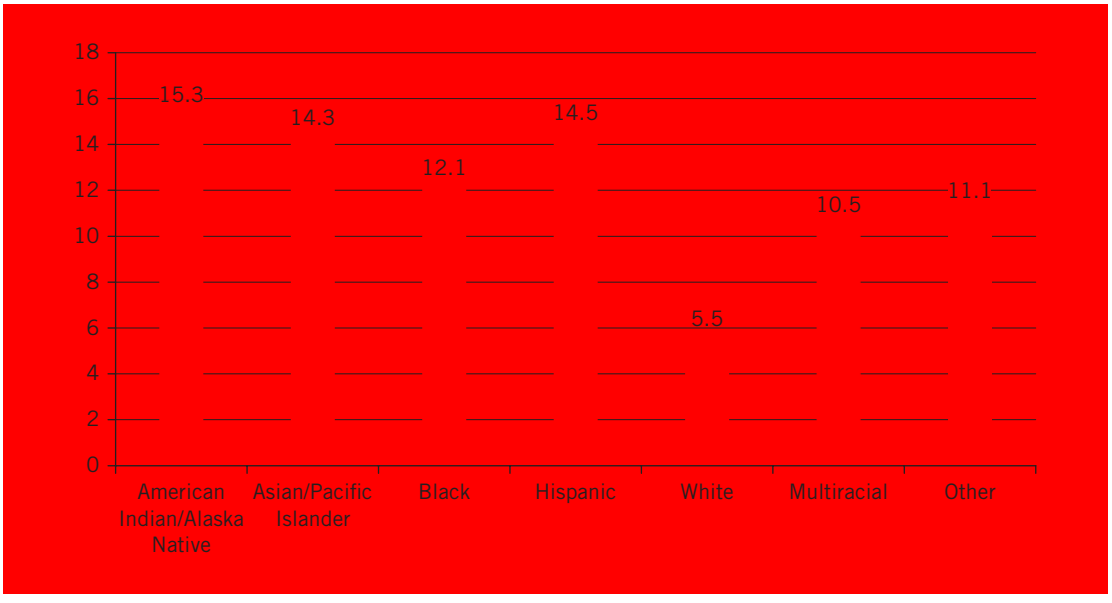
Scholars who study extended families have focused on two main areas: emotional ties between kin and the exchange of instrumental support. Overwhelmingly, most adult Americans report that they are emotionally close to their parents, to their adult children, and to their grandchildren (Swartz, 2009). Instrumental ties are also common. Extended family members exchange material support, such as monetary gifts, as well as practical support with things like housework, transportation, and caregiving. Most intergenerational assistance moves down the generations rather than up; it is only at the oldest and frailest ages that people receive more help than they give.

Differences in extended family patterns across racial groups in the United States have been well documented. One place that we see this is in multigenerational living: Three-generation households are far more common among people of color than among white people. As shown in Figure 2.1, American Indians/Alaska Natives, Asians/Pacific Islanders, African Americans, Hispanics, people who are multiracial, and people who identify as another race are more than twice as likely as white people to live in **multigenerational households**. Multigenerational Latino and Asian households are especially likely to include at least one member who is foreign born (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013). Sarkisian and Gerstel (2012) found that Black and Latino people were more likely than white people to live not only with kin but also near kin and to exchange instrumental support with kin, such as helping with housework and providing transportation.

Although racial-ethnic differences in extended family relationships are evident, social class is an important part of the story as well. Compositional analysis of the differences between white and Mexican Americans in their levels of integration with kin, for example, found that culture explained little of the observed differences; most kinship differences between these two racial-ethnic groups were explained by socioeconomic status (Sarkisian, Gerena, & Gerstel, 2007), with those of lower socioeconomic status reporting more interaction with kin than those with more resources.

Qualitative data show similar patterns. In their interviews with upper-class physicians and working-class nursing assistants, Sarkisian and Gerstel (2012) noted a marked difference in how their respondents talked about family. When the physicians were asked about their families, they talked about partners and children and, occasionally, their parents. When the nursing assistants spoke about their families, they included siblings, mothers, aunts, nieces, and nephews. One nursing assistant, a 20-year-old Black woman who lives with her partner and son, explained, "'I don't actually have family out here. My family's in Philly.' For her,

Figure 2.1 Percentage Living in Households With Three or More Generations, by Race and Ethnicity



Source: IPUMS American Community Survey, 2013-2017 five-Year Sample

family is not her partner and son; family is her relatives—her mother, cousins, and grandparents" (p. 33). As Sarkisian and Gerstel (2012) state, "Extended kin *are* family for these low wage nursing assistants" (p. 33, emphasis in original).

Extended families are also gendered, in that it is women who tend to do much of the **kinkeeping** that maintains relationships between extended family members. Women of all racial backgrounds organize family gatherings, cook holiday meals, and keep in touch with family members with phone calls and e-mails. Women also provide more practical help to family members than do men, including more childcare and elder care (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004, 2012).

Finally, extended families are also shaped by sexual identity. In her classic study of gay and lesbian families, Weston (1991) found that *chosen families*—families made up of partners, friends, and ex-partners—were common. Particularly for earlier generations of LGBTQ individuals for whom estrangement from families of origin was not uncommon, they were left to create families of their own, free from the constraints of nuclear family ideologies. Now that same-sex couples have access to legal marriage, additional research will be needed on how the changing legal context affects how they define family.

Although the importance of extended family networks is well documented, the focus on nuclear families in family discourse obscures much of this family life.

The myth of individualism masks the variety of ways that families rely on the people around them for support, sustenance, and care. Karen Hansen (2005) analyzed the "networks of care" for families in a range of social classes, and all of them, even the most privileged, relied on people outside of the nuclear family in their day-to-day lives. Yet, this assistance was usually underplayed or even made invisible. Robert, one of her respondents, is adamant that he, alone, is the one who cares for his son when the son visits. Yet, when he tells his story in more detail, it is clear that he relies on his sister and her family, with whom he lives, and a best friend to assist with the tasks of caregiving. Like most parents, he is not doing it alone, but the American myth of individualism obscures many of these extended family exchanges.

What happens when researchers and policy makers assume that the only family that counts is nuclear families? The focus on marriage and childrearing as the defining features of family reinforces public concerns about family decline. However, families are "declining" only to the extent that marriage is becoming less common. Other types of family relationships, including relationships with extended kin, are as strong as they have ever been, if not stronger. For many, extended families have become more important as marriage has become less common. Without a lifelong partner, parents instead rely on extended family—their parents, siblings, and relatives—to help care for their children. So, rather than being an indicator of family decline, lower marriage rates may instead be an indicator of the growing importance of extended family relationships (Bengston, 2001).

Change, Continuity, and Diversity in Defining Families

Definitions of families have changed over time. Burgess and Locke's (1945) influential definition, which included structural, household-based, role-based, and interactionist components, assumed that a family should meet all four of these criteria. Today, more Americans are using only one or two of these criteria, rather than on all of them. In addition, many express conflicting views, sometimes relying on structural definitions and sometimes using more interactionist ideas. Powell et al.'s (2015) research demonstrates that Americans have become less exclusive in their definitions of family, primarily by becoming more accepting of gay and lesbian families.

What has remained consistent is the central role that marriage plays in defining family. Same-sex couples who legally marry gain legitimacy as a family that couples—gay or straight—who choose not to marry often lack. Similarly, children continue to be seen as a central definitional component of families. Even in the absence of marriage, the presence of children in a household makes it more likely to be perceived as a family, and couples without children are more often excluded.

That marriage and children remain central to family definitions shows how the nuclear family continues to dominate Americans' understandings about families. Family definitions have broadened in many ways, but variations of the nuclear family remain at the core. Extended families remain marginal in family research and discourse even though they are increasingly important in the lives of many.

How one defines family has both symbolic and practical implications.

The SNAF and separate spheres ideology are historically specific ideals that continue to shape U.S. families. They also apply differently to families in different social locations.

Sociologists use four approaches to defining family: structural, household-based, role-based, and interactionist.

Americans are becoming more inclusive in their definitions of family, integrating interactionist and structural definitions.

Extended kin are becoming increasingly important in American families.