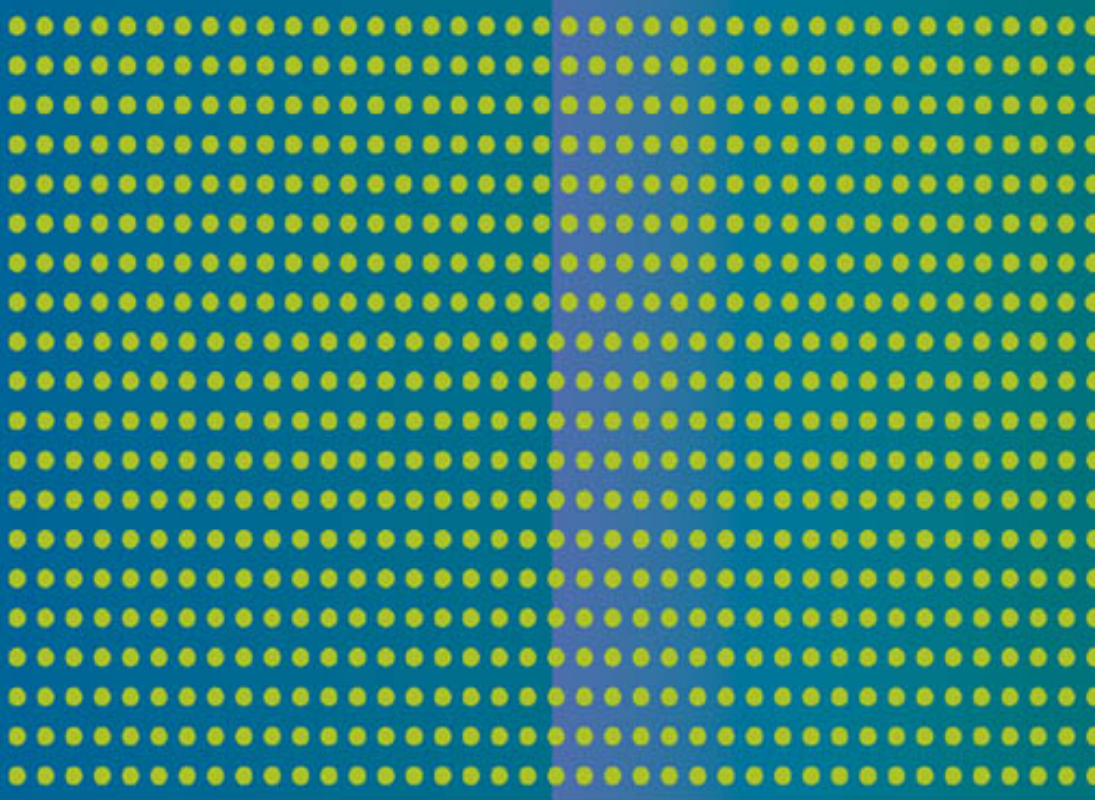
PEARSON NEW INTERNATIONAL EDITION

Diversity in Families

Baca Zinn Eitzen Wells

Ninth Edition



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From Chapter 1 of *Diversity in Families,* 9/e. Maxine Baca Zinn. D. Stanley Eitzen. Barbara Wells.
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BOX 3 Researching Families: How Do Sociologists Conduct Research on Families?
The Structural Diversity Approach

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

Family change and diversity are now highly charged issues, under fire from many quarters. In recent years, no political theme has electrified domestic politics more than the purported breakdown of the family. Some believe that current developments are symptoms of growing social decay. They think the growing diversity of family forms signals the decline of the family and the moral fabric of society. Why do so many lament the state of the family? Why is "family" such a bitterly contested battleground? These are disquieting questions that highlight the public anxiety surrounding the state of contemporary families. In the current climate of rapid social change these questions have become politicized, with competing views of the family vying for public attention.

In this book we present a sociological view of family life in the United States. We ask students to call into question existing social arrangements that many people consider sacred. This requires us to expose the images and myths that influence our perceptions and to replace them with a more inclusive view of families and the social transformations that provide a context for family change. When we understand that families are embedded in larger social and economic structures, we have a more constructive frame of vision for making sense of today's rapid changes in family life.

To begin, we need to be aware that the family is as much a cultural symbol as it is a social form—as much idea as thing (Holstein and Gubrium, 1999:29). Most family images make it difficult to think about family life objectively. As much as we want to be objective, our perceptions are guided by cultural visions of family, by our own family experiences, and, paradoxically, by the very familiarity of family life. Virtually everyone has a family. "Everyone considers himself or herself an expert on his or her own families, yet we are too close to our families to see them dispassionately" (Rosenfeld, 2007:6).

Many social conditions prevent us from being analytical about families. Not only are families familiar and commonplace, they are also mystified. Mystification is the deliberate misdefinition of family matters or "complicated stratagems to keep everyone in the dark" (Laing, 1971:77). This distorts family realities. As a result, we often misunderstand family processes in general and we even have misconceptions about our own families. Objectivity is thus obscured by two different qualities—familiarity and mystification.

Other obstacles that handicap the goal of objectivity are sacredness and secrecy (Skolnick, 1987:58). Families have myths, secrets, and information-processing rules

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

The family is not merely a social institution; it is a sacred label with strong moral connotations. At the same time, it is the most private of all society's institutions. "Equating family life with the private sphere grants a great deal of autonomy from neighborhood gossips and government regulations" (Hansen, 2005:5). The saying that "a family's business is nobody's business but their [sic] own" is not merely a statement about the right to family privacy; it symbolizes "decency" and other qualities a culture holds dear (Newman and Grauerholz, 2002:16). It also reflects the cultural value of family sacredness. The norm of family privacy gives the family an elusive quality that exists alongside its familiarity. In contemporary Western society, the family is, to use Erving Goffman's (1959) term, a "backstage" area, where people are free to act in ways they would not in public. This accounts for the deceptive quality of family relations. Much of the intimacy of family life remains hidden behind "frontstage" performances—behavior to maintain a proper appearance in front of others (Berardo, 1998; Goffman, 1959). Privacy results in "pluralistic ignorance": We have a backstage view of our own families, but we can judge others only in terms of their frontstage presentations. Often we have "inside" interpretations of other families' "outsides." However, the gap between public norms and private behavior can be wide.

The ideals that we hold about "the family" color not only how we experience family life but also how we speak of our experience. This is not

"Family" evokes a feeling of warm, caring, and psychological nurturance.
Lawrence Migdale/Pix



Lawrence Migdale/Pix



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

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



Images and Ideals

"Family" in U.S. society is a symbol, a visual image that speaks to us through the senses, including smells, tastes, textures, motions, and sounds from our own remembered experiences (Tufte and Meyerhoff, 1979:11), as well as through our dreams and longings about what family should be. For roughly 150 years before 1960, most Americans shared a common set of beliefs about family life:

> Family should consist of a husband and wife living together with their children. The father should be the head of the family, earn the family's income, and give his name to his wife and children. The mother's main tasks were to support and facilitate her husband's career, guide her children's development, look after the home, and set a moral tone for the family. Marriage was an enduring obligation for better or worse. The husband and wife jointly coped with stresses. Sexual activity was to be kept within the marriage especially for women. As parents, they had an overriding responsibility for the well-being of their children during the early years until their children entered school; they were almost solely responsible. Even later, it was the parents who had the primary duty of guiding their children's education and discipline. (Hamburg, 1993:60)

While these were merely ideals even in 1960, the images they evoke remain with us. They are found in public rhetoric—"in the discourse of politicians, social commentators, and moral leaders; in the talk of everyday interactions, and in movies, television shows and books" (Pyke, 2000:241).

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

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

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

Family as Haven

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

Family as Fulfillment

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

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

Family as Encumbrance

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

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

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



Images and Reality

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

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

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

Outside circumstances increasingly produce inner family conflicts. Social and economic conditions in the larger society make it difficult to attain the idealized family experience. For example, as women have joined the paid labor force in great numbers, husbands *and* most wives have jobs and families. As they pursue demanding careers or work at jobs with long hours, they may have little time or energy to devote to the family. (See Box 1.) For women, the difficulties of balancing work and family are widely recognized, and the image of "superwoman" has become a new cultural ideal. The superwoman who appears repeatedly in magazines and on television commercials meshes her multiple roles perfectly. If she has children, she is a supermother, able to work 40 hours a week, keep the house clean and neat, entertain, keep physically fit by jogging or taking aerobics classes, and have a meaningful relationship with the superfather, who

BOX 1 Emergent Family Trends

These Days, the Picture-Perfect American Family Just Doesn't Exist

With the debut of the Palins before a nation-wide audience, a presidential campaign that was supposed to be about the economy, Iraq or even race has unexpectedly become—for a little while, at least—a conversation about family. But even before the surprising news of 17-year-old Bristol Palin's pregnancy, the Obamas, Bidens, and McCains had spent an inordinate amount of precious convention time introducing us to their loved ones: videos, scripted shout-outs, smiling tableaus as the confetti came down. Both parties clearly thought that it was crucial for the candidates to show how deeply they value their family lives.

But if the candidates wished to convince viewers that their families were just like ours, they were undone by a 21st-century reality: There is no typical family anymore—at least not in terms of who lives in the household and how they are related. Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin noted as much. While introducing her clan to a cheering crowd of the Republican faithful, the GOP vice presidential nominee said, "From the inside, no family ever seems typical. That's how it is with us."

In fact, the diversity of American households was the unspoken lesson of both conventions, as four strikingly different kinds of families came into view. First, the Obamas. The Democratic nominee's half-sister, Maya Soetoro-Ng, spoke to the Denver crowd, highlighting his biracial family background, dominated by an often single mother and a largely absent father. Obama's wife Michelle also took a powerful turn at the podium, focusing on her husband's biography but also playing up her own high-powered career and modest roots. The Bidens were introduced to a national audience that week as well, a stepfamily formed after the tragic death of the senator's first wife. With the McCains, we see another stepfamily, formed this time after the senator's divorce. Their family also includes Bridget, a daughter adopted from Bangladesh. And the Palins bring to the stage two working parents with five children, including a pregnant teenager and an infant with Down syndrome.

Divorce itself is not new to the presidential politics—Ronald Reagan and John F. Kerry both campaigned with second wives by their sides—but never has such an extraordinary range of family histories been center stage.

A HALF-CENTURY AGO, WHEN THE TWO-PARENT, breadwinner-homemaker, first-marriage family was at its peak, all of the candidates would have conformed to the same mold. In the 1950s, iconic TV shows—the ones that you can still find while channel-surfing—celebrated the Cleavers and their ilk. Ward went to work and earned enough so that his single paycheck could keep June, Wally and the Beaver happily provided for at home. Sentiment against divorce in public life was so strong that New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller's presidential aspirations were stymied in 1964 because he had recently divorced and remarried.

But the Cleavers are only available in reruns now, and the prominence of the breadwinner-homemaker family rapidly declined in the last third of the 20th century. Married women moved into the workforce, divorce rates rose, and more children were born outside of marriage.

That traditional family unit has been replaced by a wide variety of living arrangements. Today, only 58 percent of children live with two married, biological parents. Many others live with stepparents or with single parents. Even having a pregnant teen in the home is not that unusual: About one out of six 15-year-old girls will give birth before reaching age 20, according to the National Center for Health Statistics.

The candidates seemed to realize that none of their families is typical in the old sense. None of them tried to look like the '50s family. Instead, they focused on being "typical" in a different, 21st-century sense: They worked hard to show us how emotionally close they are.

Over the past few decades, the emotional rewards of family life have become more important to Americans, as compared to the rewards of bringing home a paycheck or raising children. In a 2001 national survey conducted by the National Marriage Project, more than 80 percent of women in their 20s agreed with the statement that it's more important "to have a husband who can communicate about his deepest feelings than to have a husband who makes a good living."

Personal satisfaction, the feeling that your family is helping you grow and develop as a person, communication, openness: These are the kinds of criteria people use in evaluating their family lives. Practical concerns still matter, but if that's all that holds your family together these days, people may view it askance. Given the demographic diversity of American families, emotional closeness, not who the Census takers find in your home, has become the new gold standard.

And so all four aspiring first and second families, despite their differences, appealed to the voters in much the same way. Each wanted to show how much support

(*continued*)

(*Box 1 continued*)

and warmth they provide to one other. What matters here is not whether your current wife is your first or second but whether you draw emotional strength from her. So Obama refers to his wife as "my rock" and McCain says of his wife, Cindy, "she's more my inspiration than I am hers." What matters is not whether your teenage daughter is pregnant but whether you provide loving support to her. So Palin and her husband issued a statement assuring the nation, "As Bristol faces the responsibilities of adulthood, she knows she has our unconditional love and support." What matters is being a loving, devoted father, even after the tragedy of losing one's spouse. So Biden's son Beau introduced his father to the Democrats in Denver as "my friend, my father, my hero."

This is not to say that the modern family is a free-for-all, choose-your-own-Thanksgiving-guest-list adventure for everyone. Social conservatives, for instance, still hold the family to stricter moral standards, social conservatives tend to disapprove of divorce except in cases of infidelity or desertion. They teach their children to abstain from sex until after marriage. But the religious right's reaction to the news of Bristol Palin's pregnancy shows they are willing to embrace a family that deviates from their ideals if the parents are willing to support each other and their children through difficult times. As former Baptist preacher, Arkansas governor and GOP presidential candidate Mike Huckabee said during the convention, "People of faith aren't people of perfection."

WHAT IS IMPORTANT TODAY, IN OTHER words, is not who you live with—and how you're legally bound to them—but rather how you feel about them.

Apart from the race and gender hurdles being trampled, the 2008 campaign has also shown that Americans, whether from red or blue states, have embraced a broad definition of what constitutes a family. Some traditionalists may lament the decline of the first-marriage, single-earner households. But diversity, in this case, has clear virtues. Would we really want to go back to an era when a divorce disqualified a person from running for president?

Of course, Americans' tolerance for family diversity still has limits; many voters, for instance, find it difficult to accept gay and lesbian unions. In 2004, Mary Cheney, the lesbian daughter of Vice President Cheney, sat in the audience with her partner as her father delivered his acceptance speech at the Republican convention. But the couple did not join the rest of the Cheney family on stage afterward and did not sit with the vice president when President Bush delivered his speech the following evening.

If the trend toward embracing greater diversity continues, however, convention stages a generation from now could easily look quite different from this year's. We could all be watching as a gay or lesbian candidate shouts out to his or her "rock" or "inspiration": a same-sex partner, smiling from the VIP box.

Source: Cherlin, Andrew J. "Public Display" (2008) *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition* (September 15–21): 25–26.

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

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

The symbolic families that shape our thinking are misleading when they become standards against which we measure ourselves. They become normative (in

the sense of obligatory) and operate as models affecting a great range of action and response. Not only is the symbolic family the measuring rod that shapes public policy; it guides internal evaluations of our own success and failure as family members.

We live in an "information" society filled with images and messages. Much of the vast flood of imagery deals with family life and is aimed at families. The mass media entertains us with endless dramatizations of family normality and deviance. From scenes of domestic perfection exhibited on television by the Cleavers, the Bradys, and the Huxtables, we have been indoctrinated with images of a family life that never existed (Taylor, 1992:64). Certainly, we are past the days of the perfect mom and all-wise dad. Today's television families are infinitely more realistic. Soap-opera families and programs like *The Simpsons, Everybody Loves Raymond, George Lopez,* and *Family Guy* present the nitty-gritty of family life: money problems, divorce, sex, and sibling rivalry. There have also been popular television shows in recent years about urban single people: *Seinfeld, Friends, Sex and the City, Will and Grace,* and *Two and a Half Men* (Lichter and Qian, 2004:1). Although today's television shows reflect diverse family structures, the families we "live by" continue to shape our expectations. We *expect* families to be happy and harmonious, to soothe away the cares of life outside the home. Disappointments in the home then become a source of inadequacy when family life fails to measure up to the imagined harmony of other families (Lerner, 1982:141; Scanzoni, 2004). Stephanie Coontz, the author of *The Way We Never Were* (1992), a book about family images, myths, and half-truths, finds that guilt is a common reaction to the discord between images and reality:



The mythical monolithic model. EyeWire Collection/Getty Images—Photodisc-Royalty Free

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

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

The Mythical U.S. Family

Family images are a composite of several closely related but distinct myths about the family. **Myths** are beliefs that are held uncritically and without examination or scrutiny (Crosby, 1985). These myths are bound up with nostalgic memory, selective perception, and cultural values concerning what is typical and true about the family. We will address the most prevailing myths that are popularly accepted as true in our society.

The Myth of a Stable and Harmonious Family of the Past

Most people think that families of the past were better than families of the present. In our collective imagination, families in past times were more stable, better adjusted, and happier. There are two reasons for this flawed belief. First, we tend to be selective about what we remember. In other words, we romanticize the past. Second, extraordinary changes in family life *have* occurred over the past few decades. A backward-looking approach makes it seem as if the families of the twenty-first century are in serious trouble. However, public anxiety about families is not new:

> One thing that never seems to change is the notion that family is not what it used to be. Families past are presented to us not only as more stable but as more authentic than families present. We imagine their times to have been the days when fathers were fathers, mothers true mothers, and children still children. Families past are invariably portrayed as simpler, less problematic. We imagine them not only as large but as better integrated, untroubled by generational divisions, close to kin, respectful of the old, honoring the dead. (Gillis, 1996:3)



Contemporary families cannot measure up to romantic notions about "family values."
SuperStock/Getty Images

On closer examination, this glorified family is a historical fiction that never existed (Coontz, 1999a). Such nostalgic images of "traditional" families mask the inevitable dilemmas that accompany family life.

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

To judge marriage of the past as better than contemporary marriage is to ignore historical changes. We expect more of marriage than did our forebears, but this fact makes modern marriage neither better nor worse, only different. Our challenge is to avoid nostalgia for a mythic past and examine the real problems facing today's families (Mintz, 2004).

The Myth of Separate Worlds

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

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

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

In our family lives we feel family strains from conflicts posed by the relationship between family and broader social systems, yet the *popular* conception of the family remains that of a special enclave, detached from the outside world. This split vision is rooted in certain social realities. Modern society does demarcate public and private spheres, with the family representing the quintessentially private arena. The vision of the family as a private reserve, however, does not prevent society from intruding on every aspect of family life. There are close and sometimes combustible connections between the internal life of families and the organization of paid work, state-organized welfare and legal systems, schools, and day care centers (Thorne, 1992:5). Family life

is constantly squeezed by the demands of these and other institutions. This is why we must reject the assumption that the family is a "haven in a heartless world." It cannot function as a haven when outside forces encroach on it (Lasch, 1975).

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

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

Just as societal changes have weakened parents' authority, so have other large-scale changes revealed flaws in treating family and society in opposition. Globalization and the changes it produces in the economy, the workplace, and the nation-state are among the most important forces shaping family life today. Global forces affect families in profound ways. For example, increasingly global job markets produce uncertainly for workers and their families as jobs are outsourced (Karraker, 2008:19). Globalization creates greater mobility in the search for work. It increases nonstandard work schedules, and it makes for longer work hours for most workers. Political globalization undermines the ability of nation-states and their various governmental agencies to control their own economy, the very nature of their jobs, and the income needed for family maintenance. And as Edgar explains, globalization threatens family control of its members. With the anonymity of the World Wide Web, the global networks of interacting strangers, and the freedom of workers to move as markets require, globalization forever alters the life course and interpersonal relationships of millions around the world (Edgar, 2004). Such trends heighten the connections between families and other structural forces.

The Myth of the Monolithic Family Form

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

by almost two to one (AmeriStat, 2003c; Lichter and Qian, 2004:1).

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

Although this family type now represents a small minority of U.S. families, major social and cultural forces continue to assume this singular form. In reality, "this is an age of increasing family diversity" (Marks, 2006:62). It now makes more sense to talk about "types of families" (Mabry et al., 2004:93). Contemporary family types represent a multitude of family formations including single-parent households, stepparent families, extended multigenerational households, gay and straight cohabiting couples, child-free couples, transnational families, multiracial families, lone householders with ties to various families, and many other kinds of families (see Box 2). The tension between this diverse array of family groupings and the idealized 1950s family creates disagreement about what makes up families. The question of what constitutes a family, where its boundaries are drawn, and who does or does not belong to it at any point in time triggers many more questions. In fact, there is no consensus among social agencies, professionals, and ordinary people on what currently constitutes a family (Aerts, 1993:7; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2004:449). Even our nation's most prominent political figures do not live in picture-perfect families. (See Box 1.)

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

BOX 2

Emergent Family Trends

The New Demographics of Families

It is clear from U.S. Census projections that U.S. families are changing. It is also clear that, despite the fact that we have been aware that these changes have been coming for the past 20 years, family scientists have done little in the area of theory development to help us understand how to address these emerging families. Some of the most important issues that researchers need to address center on understanding what the new families will look like. However, one problem with the area of family studies is that we are still using theory and theoretical constructs from the 1950s in the twenty-first century to explain behaviors that are unique to this era. For example, recent trends in U.S. families suggest the following about families of the near future:

- At least one-half of all children will spend at least one-quarter of their lives in female-headed households.
- The new families will experience severely limited economic growth and growth opportunities.
- The new families will be characterized by a semi-extended family form made up of fictive kin with some ties to the family members' original homelands.
- The new families will more than likely live in households that have two primary languages for at least two generations.
- The new families will involve at least a definite recognition of sexually variant relatives and/or parents.
- The new families will consist primarily of people of color.
- The new families will have social customs, beliefs, attitudes, and communication forms that researchers have not previously examined using the current theoretical constructs.
- The new families will have unique adaptations to currently mainstream religious beliefs—they may not all be Christians.
- The new families will probably have some form of major involvement with governmental institutions (e.g., immigration, homeland security, criminal justice, public welfare, and social services), not by choice in most cases.
- The new families will be stigmatized in part because we in the scientific community will fail to adapt our research and theories as necessary to understand these families.

Source: Webb, Farrell J., "The New Demographics of Families." In *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Research*, Vern L. Bengston, Alan C. Acock, Katherine R. Allen, Peggye Dilworth-Anderson, and David M. Klein (eds.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005, p. 101.

1999:31). A good example of the importance of distinguishing between family and household is the restructuring of family obligations and household composition after divorce (Ferree, 1991:107). Family members do not always live in the same households. When separation and divorce break the bonds between mother and father, bonds between children and parents can remain intact. Consequently, an increasing number of families extend across two or more households, generations, marital and legal statuses, blood ties, and even continents! People may live apart and still be in the same family. Therefore, household and family may overlap, but they are not the same thing. People may share a household and not consider themselves a family, and people may feel like a family while not living together (Bridenthal, 1981:48). (See Figure 1 on changes in households between 1970 through 2005.)

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

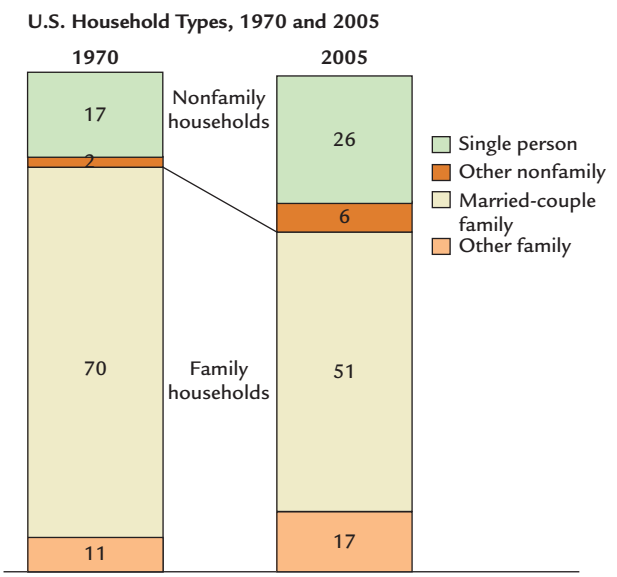
Perhaps the most striking change in the national profile of families is the rise in mother-only households and the poverty that often accompanies them. The vast majority of single-parent households are maintained by mothers. Patterns of gender inequality in the larger society contribute to "the feminization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

A growing trend toward the maintenance of households by persons living alone or with others to whom they are not related has also contributed to a greater variety of living arrangements. Factors contributing to the surge of nonfamily households include the increased tendency of young adults to move away from home at an early

Figure 1

U.S. Household Types, 1970 and 2005

Source: Mc Falls, Joseph A. Jr., *Population: A Lively Introduction*, 5th ed. *Population Bulletin.* 62 (1). Washington, DC, Population Reference Bureau, March 2007, p. 18.



age, postponement of marriage, the continued high rate of divorce, and increasing numbers of elderly persons living alone.

Economic and demographic forces are creating other changes as well. The shifting racial and ethnic balance of the population is also transforming U.S. family patterns. At the beginning of the twentieth century, fewer than one in five Americans belonged to a racial or ethnic minority. Today, racial ethnics make up one-fourth of the U.S. population. They will account for one-third of the population in the year 2030. Some of the most significant differences between various minority groups and dominant groups involve variations in family and household structure (Schwede et al., 2005). As the United States grows ever more diverse in racial and ethnic composition, family diversity will remain evident. One type of family—made up of U.S.-born Whites—is becoming less dominant, and the future characteristics of the family will increasingly be influenced by what immigrant and minority families look like and do (Lichter and Qian, 2004:2; Marks, 2006). Race and class are important structural factors underlying the diversity of family forms (see Box 2).

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

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

The Myth of a Unified Family Experience

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

New research has cut through romantic assumptions about family and household unity, showing that women, men, and children experience their families in different ways. The best way to understand "within-family diversity" is to "decompose" the family—that is, to break it down into its essential components (Mitchell, 1966). Two key components of all families are the gender system and the age system. These two systems produce different realities for men and women as well as for children and adults. These systems shape every activity that has to do with daily family living, such as the division of household labor, leisure activities, the giving and receiving of nurturance and emotional support, decisions about consumption, and employment. In addition, age and gender often produce different and conflicting interests among family members. This means that family experience varies dramatically for children and adults and for women and men (Wolfe, 1990).

Jessie Bernard's classic work on marriage revealed that every marital union actually contains two marriages—his and hers—and that the two do not always coincide (Bernard, 1971). Researchers who ask husbands and wives identical questions about their marriages often get quite different replies, even to fairly simple, factual questions. The family as a **gendered institution** (Acker, 1992) is one of the most important themes in family research. There are gender differences in every aspect of family living,

including decision making, household division of labor, and forms of intimacy and sexuality. Similarly, divorce affects female and male family members differently. Girls and boys experience their childhoods differently as there are different expectations, different rules, and different punishments according to gender. **Patriarchy** is the term used to refer to social relations in which men are dominant over women. Patriarchy in the larger society gives shape to a family system in which men are accorded more prestige and more privileges and in which they wield greater power.

Knowing that family experiences vary by gender, we can better understand the problems associated with the image of the family as a harbor from life's storms. The family is idealized as a personal retreat, yet for most women it is a workplace, a place of domestic labor and child care. For whom, then, is the home a refuge—a nurturant haven? Barrie Thorne has provided the following answer:

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

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

The Myth of Family Consensus

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

Cultural mythology has it that the family is a place of love and solidarity. The reality is that people do not always find nurturance and support in their families. Like workplaces and other social arenas, families are themselves sites of negotiation, exchange, power, conflict, and inequality (Cohen and MacCartney, 2004:186). Behind closed doors, the other face of the family may be the opposite of the myth. In marriage, for example, the political reality of husband–wife relationships is evident in household division of labor, in family decision making, and "in extreme form in incidents of wife abuse" (Thorne, 1982:13). Parents' disproportionate power over their offspring produces family strains at all social levels.

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

Although we commonly romanticize the family as a place where all is shared and where nobody measures, research reveals that money matters are a common

source of family strife (Funderberg, 2003). According to Marcia Millman, there is probably more counting in families than in other settings:

> In many ways, families display the same hard traits of the market. One sees this expressed in the ways we use money, often unconsciously, to control children, punish estranged spouses, measure a parent's true feelings for us, buy freedom from relationships, or stop a partner from leaving. Furthermore, in the family as in the workplace, there is a system of exchange with a perpetual accounting and sanctions for not performing as expected. But because of our image of the family as a place of love and sharing (and our deep wish that it be so) we underestimate the conflicts of interest and rivalries that are common, if not inevitable, and make light of the deadly serious bookkeeping. (Millman, 1991:9)

The emotional quality of family life can produce deep ambivalence because emotional relationships inevitably contain negative as well as positive feelings. This combination of love and antagonism sets intimate relationships apart from less intimate ones. Therefore, ambiguity is an integral part of family experience.

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



Drawing by Barbara Smaller, The New Yorker Magazine, Inc./Cartoonbank.com

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

adolescents, wives, and husbands) seek escape. Closeness, privacy, and intimacy can also create disorder and distance among family members.

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

> Until we admit that families may exhibit the most brutalizing, abusing, dangerous, and inhumane types of interaction patterns as well as loving, caring, protecting, helping, sustaining, and nurturing types of relationships, we will fail to understand the range of human interaction that takes place within families. (Eichler, 1981:384)

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

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

The Myth of Family Decline as the Cause of Social Problems

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

> Each day, the media serve up new stories and statistics documenting that marriage is going the way of the horse and buggy, that we are becoming a nation without fathers and that, as a result, children are suffering and society is falling apart. The breakdown of the family is taken for granted as a simple social fact. The only question is who or what is to blame and how can we restore the family to the way we imagine it used to be. (Mason et al., 2003:1)

In recent years, the definition of the family has been the focus of public debates. At the end of the twentieth century, rhetoric about the eroding "traditional family" became broadly accepted as a way of explaining such social ills as poverty, crime, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and gang violence. In the early 1990s, former Vice President Dan Quayle added to the national anxiety by denouncing television character

Murphy Brown for having a baby without a husband. Declaring that unwed motherhood was destroying the nation, Quayle blamed the 1992 Los Angeles riots on family decline. Although such hysteria has subsided, ideas about family decline and social problems persist (Mintz, 2004).

Welfare reform enacted in 1966 included the goal of promoting the two-parent family. The Personal Responsibility and Welfare Reform Act declared in its preamble that the married, two-parent family is the foundation of a successful society (Scanzoni, 2004:10). According to this logic, the two-parent family is the basis of social order. This family form is extolled as the one in which children are best socialized to become good citizens and in which women and men perform the roles essential to society. Any change in family structure is viewed as moral decline—that is, a loss of "family values." But the debate about declining family values is really about a decline in a particular family *structure* (Dill et al., 1993). The family-values refrain is nothing more than a way of distinguishing the two-parent family from other family types. Single-parent families produced by divorce and unwed motherhood are denounced as selfish practices that are damaging children, destroying families, and tearing apart the fabric of society. Put very generally, the family-decline position is that "as a result of hedonistic individualism, we are letting our 'family values' slip away and what is needed now is nothing short of a moral rearmament on behalf of parental responsibility. From this movement come proposals to make divorce more difficult and to discourage strongly or even punish giving birth outside of marriage" (Mason et al., 2003:3).

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

What is wrong with the claim that family decline is the root cause of many social problems? This reasoning is flawed in two fundamental respects. First, it reverses the relationship between family and society by treating the family as the building block of society rather than *a product of social conditions.* The notion that changing families threaten society is a form of social reductionism. In this simple model of society, the family is the basic unit, the bedrock of society that "causes political and economic institutions to work or not to work" (Young, 1994:89). In reality, families are *situated within the larger political and economic conditions.* Family units are not responsible for social order (or disorder) in the larger society. Second, it ignores the structural reasons for family breakdown. Those who persist in seeing the current shifts in family life as the source of disarray have it backward (Stacey, 1994). Divorce and single parenthood are the *consequences* of social and economic dislocations rather than the cause, as some would have us believe. Disappearing jobs, declining earnings, and low-wage work have far worse effects on families than the demise of family values. The family-decline approach is blind to the realities of rising inequality, concentrated poverty, and escalating government policies of social abandonment. They reverse cause and effect, thus making single parents a convenient scapegoat. The simple solution that we return to the nuclear family at all costs allows the public and

the government to escape social responsibilities, such as intervening in the ghettos, building new houses and schools, and creating millions of jobs that we need. This view moves the focus from the larger society to individual family members, who must then devise their own solutions for the social, economic, and technological shifts of our times.

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

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

Healthy families need healthy environments. Many neighborhoods have substandard services such as schools, health care, recreation facilities, sanitation, and police and fire protection. Due to massive economic transformations and various kinds of social disinvestment in the lives of the poor, families across the country are forced to live amid crime, gangs, pollution, drugs, and inadequate housing. These are the real enemies of strong families. The important question to ask about U.S. families is not how well do they conform to a particular image of the family but, rather, "how well do they function—what kind of loving, care, and nurturance do they provide?" (Mason et al., 2003:2).



A New Framework for Understanding Families

The Sociological Perspective

We have seen that the conventional wisdom about the family is often wrong. Popular ideas about family life are often "reductionist" in that they focus almost exclusively on individuals as they perform their family roles (Sprey, 2001:4). This book is different. It is firmly grounded in the sociological perspective for a critical understanding of

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

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

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

The societal level is not the only focus of our inquiry. We also emphasize the interior life of families. The micro level of analysis examines the internal dynamics of family life. In this type of analysis, the family is a "small group in which individuals spend much of their lives" (Kain, 1990:15). In micro analysis we examine the varied "experiences of kinship, intimacy, and domestic sharing" (Thorne, 1992:12). This is where the vital interpersonal dramas of love and domination, of companionship and conflict, of happiness and hatred occur. Of course, intimate family relationships reflect the hierarchies of the larger social world. Understanding families requires that we study both the macro level and the micro level and how each affects the other (see Box 3 for a look at the methods sociologists use in doing research on families).

Because our emphasis is on social structure, the reader is required to accept a second fundamental assumption of the sociological perspective: the need to adopt a critical stance toward all social arrangements. We must ask these questions: How does society really work? How do current social and economic changes affect families and the individuals within them? Who has power in society? How does this affect the formation and character of families? Who benefits under the existing social arrangements and who does not? To ask such questions means that the inquirer is interested in looking beyond the commonly accepted definitions of family and society.

The Paradigm Shift in Family Studies

The world today is in the midst of profound social changes in which people are taking apart and renegotiating "what used to be straightforwardly known as 'the family' " (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2004:499). Just as families in the nation and

BOX 3

Researching Families

How Do Sociologists Conduct Research on Families?

There are many methods for studying families; each has its own purpose and its own underlying logic that justifies using the method. A widely used distinction is that between **quantitative** and **qualitative methods.**

The most frequently used quantitative method is the sample survey (often shortened to "survey"), which focuses on specific behaviors or attitudes and on factors that are hypothesized to influence them. The researcher designs a measure for each behavior or attitude and each potential explanatory factor. As a simple illustrative example, the researcher might expect that how much education a husband has influences how much housework he does. Education is easily measured in years and housework in hours per week, so a survey questionnaire can be designed for interviewing husbands on these matters. The goal is to understand whether such a relationship between education and housework exists for all husbands in the population; since they are too numerous, the researcher must interview an appropriately selected sample. By using suitable statistical procedures, the researcher can find out whether housework is related to education in the sample and whether the results in the sample can be generalized to the population. Measurement, statistical analysis, and generalization of findings from a sample to a population are the distinguishing features of quantitative research.

Qualitative and quantitative methods sometimes have been regarded as incompatible, but several researchers have used them in a complementary fashion. Nevertheless, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches has not been easy because qualitative methods have a different focus and a different starting point than quantitative approaches. Qualitative researchers begin with the premise that human activity is interpretive activity. That is, we cannot do anything without its having some meanings, and qualitative researchers want to discover meanings—how people interpret what they do. Returning to the previous example, the number of hours a week a husband does housework is of some interest, but of more interest is its meaning to him and to his wife. Does he define what he is doing as "helping" his wife in "her" tasks? Or is he a committed believer in gender equality who defines housework as something to be shared equally? Or is there some other, less obvious meaning? And how does she define what he is doing? And how do those meanings shape their interactions and relationships?

The qualitative researcher usually begins research with questions in mind rather than with specific hypotheses—questions about how people do things and what those activities mean. There are two main types of qualitative research procedures. One is called ethnography. The ethnographer observes people and talks with them over a period of weeks, months, or years as they interact in their customary round of life. The researcher compares participants with those being studied and records observations in field notes. The second is known by various names—qualitative interviewing, unstructured or semi-structured interviewing, in-depth interviewing. The researcher designs an interview guide with open-ended questions that invite and allow the interviewee to answer in his or her own words. Qualitative research is a process of discovery of the implicit and explicit categories through which people define and construct their interpersonal activity. The researcher then tries to understand those categories in some larger theoretical framework. He or she creates categories that facilitate understanding the meanings in use by those studied. The distinguishing features of qualitative research are conversational and participant observation data, discovering meanings in use, interpreting those user meanings, and creating interpretive categories and concepts that are general enough to serve in studying other groups.

One of the issues in collecting qualitative interview data is whether family members should be interviewed individually or jointly. Individual interviewing is more common. Important ethical dilemmas are encountered in doing qualitative research on families. By its nature, such research seeks to penetrate family privacy in the interest of increased understanding of how families function. The full consequences of this effort cannot be known in advance either by the researchers or by the participants. Researchers should be sensitive to possible hazards to family members.

Source: Handel, Gerald and Gail Whitchurch (eds.), "Introduction to Part II: Research Methods." In *The Psychosocial Interior of the Family,* 4th ed. New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1994, pp. 49–51.

the world are changing dramatically, so is the scholarship on families. As society experiences major "earthquakes," social science thinking about families is undergoing "seismic shifts." Today, new ideas about diversity and social context are sweeping the family field and making it more exciting than ever before (Allen and Demo, 1995; Bengston et al., 2005; Cheal, 1991; Coleman and Ganog, 2004; Mann et al., 1997; Scott et al., 2004).

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

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

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

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

The Structural Diversity Approach

The Structural Diversity approach views all families in society as shaped through their interaction with social structures. The approach goes beyond adding different group experiences to already established frameworks of thought (Andersen and

Collins, 2010). We explore the close connections between the inner workings of family life and the structural forces that shape *all* families, albeit in different ways. Our coverage of the nation's various family arrangements is not simply for cultural appreciation. We want you to understand *why* families are diverse. We provide a coherent analysis as well as a new approach. This approach is based on the premise that families are divided along structural lines that shape their form and functioning. The new perspective on families incorporates the following themes.

1. *Families are socially constructed and historically changing.* Although we think of families as "natural," there is no universal definition of the family. Social history shows that families vary by economic, political, and cultural conditions. Supporting this view are the social constructionist and social structural theoretical approaches. To say that families are socially constructed means that they develop in the context of social and economic realities. Different social and economic contexts define and organize families differently. What seems "natural" depends on time, place, and circumstance. How a family is defined depends on the historical period, the society, and even the social stratum within that society (Coltrane, 1998:1–9). "Stages we take for granted like childhood, adolescence, and adulthood are not timeless entities built into human nature but aspects of the human condition that have been reshaped with historical changes" (Skolnick, 1993:45). The point is that the form and meaning of families, gender, motherhood, fatherhood, or childhood are socially and historically varied.

2. *Family diversity is produced by the same structures that organize society as a whole.* The institution of the family is intertwined with other social institutions including the economy, politics, education, and religion. Families are also integrally tied to systems of stratification and inequality such as class, race, and gender. Both social institutions and social stratification systems divide families along structural lines. They create different contexts for family living through their unequal distribution of social resources and opportunities. Different contexts or "social locations" are what cause differences. Instead of being an intrinsic property of groups that are culturally different, family variation is *structural.* The relationship between opportunity systems and families is central to family diversity. The uneven distribution of work, wages, and other family requirements produce multiple family forms and multiple family experiences (Baca Zinn, 2000). At any particular time, a society will contain a range of family types that vary with social class, race, region, and other structural conditions. Today, global forces also affect families; that is, "every family on earth is more or less touched by global economic and political realities" (Karraker, 2008:8).

   Family diversity can be based on "social relations between dominant and subordinate groups" (Weber, 2001:81). Not only do power relations determine the resources different groups have available for family life, but "there is a direct relationship between the privileged circumstances of some families and the disadvantaged position of other families" (Garey and Hansen, 1998:xvi). Family variation is *relational.* This means that the lives of different groups are linked even without face-to-face relations (Glenn, 2002:14). For example, the histories of racial-ethnic families in the United States were not a matter of simple coexistence with dominant race and class groups. Instead, the opportunities of some families rested on the disadvantages of other families (Dill, 1994). In the twenty-first century, global forces are producing new connections between different family forms in far-reaching parts of the world. The growing demand for paid

domestic workers is part of an international division of labor in which women from developing nations leave their families to work for U.S. families and those of other post-industrial countries. The work they do enables women in privileged families to have professional careers even as the maids, nannies, and other caretakers are forced to accommodate their lives to the demands of their labor and live across the world from their own families (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Parrenas, 2001). This is one way in which globalization is producing new forms of privilege and disadvantage that rest on distinctive family arrangements and on structurally connected "disparities between families in the third world and those in the first world" (Karraker, 2008:99).

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

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

   A structural analysis must not lose sight of the human beings who shape their families through their own actions and behaviors. Families, after all, are not just molded from the "outside in." What happens on a daily basis in domestic settings also constructs families. Women, men, and children are not passive. They actively shape their families by adapting to, and changing, certain aspects of their social environments. This process is called **human agency.** People often use their families in order to survive. Their ingenuity and agency may result in new family arrangements. In other cases, family inventions are guided by choice as much as survival. Behaviors that family members use in adapting to structural constraints and stressful events are called "family adaptive strategies." If used carefully, the concept of human agency can serve as a sensitizing device (Moen and Wethington, 1992), illustrating meaningful interaction between social actors and their social environments.

5. *Understanding families means challenging monolithic ideas that conceive of the family in idealistic ways.* This differs from past approaches, which were based on studies involving mostly White, middle-class families. This practice distorted the reality of lives within most families, given that the United States has always had a significant portion of families of color and far too many families in poor or working classes (McGraw and Walker, 2004:176). Today, the family field takes various