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FAMILY LIFE NOW

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1.1 Examine the characteristics of marriage in a global society and how generational views differ regarding the function of marriages and families.
- 1.2 Describe the landscape and trends of various family structures in the United States today.
- 1.3 Summarize the similarities and differences between contemporary families.
- 1.4 Explain the ways in which societies and cultures influence the experiences of marriage and family life.
- 1.5 Assess the ways in which family practitioners and other helping professionals work to assist families to develop their full potential.

It has been nearly 43 years since my wedding day, and I remember it as if it happened yesterday—the dusting of snow on the ground, friends I knew I would never lose touch with, the tears in my mother’s eyes, my husband-to-be’s locked gaze on mine. And my father’s words have stayed with me, spoken just seconds before we took that first step toward my chosen life mate:

When you take your first step down the aisle, you must do so as if the word ‘divorce’ does not exist—you must enter this marriage knowing that divorce is a possibility, but something that should be your very last resort. Because after today, I can guarantee you that along with the happiness and joy you are feeling at this very moment, marriage will bring with it sorrow. There will be heartbreak. There will be tragedy. There will be financial difficulties. Before I walk you down the aisle, you must know in your heart that marriage—and everything that comes with it—is truly what you want.

I didn’t fully understand then that marriage is beautiful and terrible things.

Characterizing couple relationships, marriage, and family life is a tall order. My youngest son once asked me, “Mom, why do you need to teach a class about families? Doesn’t everyone have one?” He had no idea how complicated and lengthy my response would be! Intimate relationships, marriage, and family are a complex web of interwoven influences: intimacy, gender and gender roles, sex, childbearing and parenting, family conflict, divorce and remarriage, family stress, family distress, family communication patterns, dual careers, work/family conflicts, finances, and a wide array of realistic and not-so-realistic expectations. In addition to this potentially endless list of influences, we all experience family life from a different perspective: Each of us is an expert in our own interpretations and experiences of “family” and other intimate relationships. Because of these experiences, we often take our first steps into a serious intimate relationship thinking we *know* everything that comes with a commitment to a life partner.

But realistically speaking, none of us is equipped to tackle the “everything” that comes with coupling, marriage, and other intimate relationships. Parents may argue; they may experience financial hardship or the loss of a pregnancy; parents or children may become ill; sex may be less than ideal; and in-laws may be a point of contention. Couples may disagree about who should get the children off to school or daycare, or they may have difficulty getting used to each other’s sometimes-annoying habits. In the course of a relationship, we may experience infidelity or family or partner violence. Events outside of our control, such as being deployed to a military zone overseas or falling victim to a national economic crisis, may forever shake our sense of reality. We change. Our partners change. Families change. We grow. Maybe together, maybe apart. And the “everything” we have in our relationships is different from what we expected.

## WHAT IS MARRIAGE?

Our intimate relationships, marriages, families, and individual lives within the context of family are integral facets of who we are. Most of us don’t need a course in family life to enable us to be active family members. Some students taking this course do so because they hope to pursue careers in family services

or policy, family therapy, ministry, or family education. Other students take this course because they want to deepen their understanding of the workings of family so that they may someday enjoy fulfilling, gratifying, and rewarding relationships of their own. Is it really possible to prepare for relationship life and family life? Is it possible, for example, to “divorce-proof” a marriage, or to understand how and why people communicate the way they do? If it seems our parents’ relationship is in a crisis, or if a sibling is causing parents undue stress, does our understanding of the science of family life make a difference?

Your instructor and I are privileged to help you gain an understanding of how you affect and are affected by the intimate relationships in your life and to help you better understand the dynamics of your family life. By pointing you toward a path along which you make your own discoveries, we are helping you to gain insight into the intricacies of family life and intimate life. We begin our intriguing study of contemporary family life and intimate relationships by first gaining an understanding of the different facets of marriage. This discussion is followed by an examination of the composition of today’s families.

### Marriage in a Global Society

Marriage includes religious, legal, and social aspects, and people worldwide experience marriage and family differently. To some, marriage is only a piece of paper that has no significance or importance to the relationship. To others, marriage is believed to be a social union, wherein the partners declare a commitment to one another. And to others, marriage is a religious, holy, consecrated act.

### Understanding Marriage as a Social or Civil Union

A **social union**—often referred to as a **civil union**—is a legal term that speaks to the commitment, or the marriage contract, made by the partners. In the United States, marriage is a union that is legally allowed between heterosexual couples or homosexual couples. In 2004, one state had legalized same-sex marriage, but in June 2015, the United States Supreme Court struck down all state bans on same-sex marriage, legalizing it in all 50 states. The decision also required that all states honor out-of-state same-sex marriage licenses. This social/civil union carries with it binding, legal obligations. Although the term *civil union* was once more commonly associated with same-sex partners who desired to socially declare their commitment to one another, the term is still used worldwide to acknowledge the legal status of marriages.

Students often ask me why couples need a piece of paper (a marriage license) in order for their state to recognize their union. According to the U.S. Supreme Court (1888), American marriage is defined as a *legally* recognized social union—a *legal* and binding civil contract that is thought to be permanent—between adults who meet the specified *legal* age requirements, and who are otherwise not *legally* married to another individual. And a marriage is not considered *legal* unless the couple obtains a government-issued marriage license. Thus, couples need a marriage license because, within the United States, marriage is a *legal* commitment, not a private bond between people.

Marriage is also a legal contract between the couple and the state in which the couple resides. The instant the couple says “I do,” and the wedding officiate pronounces them to be wed, their relationship acquires legal status. As the Supreme Court observed in 1888, “The relation once formed, the law steps in and holds the parties to various obligations and liabilities.”

Many of you may someday choose a marriage partner based on love and intimacy, your shared values and principles, and a desire for a similar lifestyle. Or, perhaps after completion of your studies, you will return to your home country where your life mate will be (or has already been) chosen for you. As you begin your study of couples, marriage, and family life, it is important to keep in mind that marriages across cultures do not necessarily follow the Western process of selecting a life mate. In parts of the world today, for instance, child brides, charity marriages (*sadaqa*), and forced marriages are commonplace social unions (Saad, 2002). In the time it has taken you to read the introductory paragraphs in this chapter, 52 girls under the age of 18 have married: 12 million per year, or 23 girls every minute (Human Rights Campaign, 2023).



Marriage is a social or civil union, and it is a legal contract between spouses. In 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in all 50 states. This ruling qualifies all married persons to receive the benefits of marriage, such as social security, tax, and veteran/military benefits.

National Archives

Child marriage is not specific to any one religion, culture, or ethnicity, and it occurs in regions across the globe. South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa have the highest rates of child marriage, with India having highest number of child marriages. Today, one third of all of the world's child brides live in India, and nearly one in four (23 percent) young women are married before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2023). Niger also has a high rate of early forced child marriage, with 76 percent of girls married before their 18th birthday; the average age of marriage for girls is 15.7 (USAID, 2023). These marriages occur for a variety of reasons, including poverty, gender norms (low social, political, and economic status), and lack of education (Girls Not Brides, 2024). Marrying at young ages carries a number of dangers for girls. According to the Government of Canada (2024), these young brides are at high risk for

- Sexual and gender-based violence.
- Poorer health and health complications.
- Contracting STIs, HIV/AIDS.
- Death from childbirth complications—childbirth is the leading cause of death for girls ages 15 to 19 in developing countries.

Girls may be married off to relative strangers or even to family members (Girls Not Brides, 2024). For example, in Bedouin communities in Egypt, some girls are forced to marry their paternal cousins. The Amhara people of Ethiopia negotiate marriages between two families, with a civil ceremony following to seal the contract. In Somalia, a man becomes engaged to the woman before she is even born. He makes the marriage arrangements with the expectant parents, to whom gifts are given to seal the marital rights. And in the United States, people often chose their future mates based on love or other interpersonal attraction reasons, without necessarily seeking their parents' approval.

**Understanding the Social and Economic Aspects of Marriage.** Marriage is an important social institution, or structure, and serves society on several levels. The structure of the 17th-century American family in Colonial Williamsburg protected the aristocratic family's wealth and political power; at the

same time, the common family structure provided efficient production units for lower-class families, such as planters (farmers) and shopkeepers. It was within the family that children were educated and received religious instruction. It was also within the family that the elderly and disabled were cared for. Thus, the family was the basic political, religious, social, and economic unit of colonial living. Even today in contemporary America, the family is foundational to many levels of society. David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, co-founders of the National Marriage Project, maintain that the marital union is the “social glue,” the “fundamental social institution that contributes to the physical, emotional, and economic health of men, women, and children—and thus to the nation as a whole” (2002, p. 4).

In addition to forming a social union, many couples form an economic partnership by sharing economic resources such as bank and investment accounts, property, and cars. Each time a marriage takes place—whether heterosexual or LGBTQIA+—the new social unit takes on certain financial responsibilities that are necessary for the society’s survival, such as rearing and socializing children either born or brought into the relationship (such as by foster parenting or adoption). We explore the economics of marriage at length in Chapter 12.

**Marriage as a Religious Act.** In the Christian, Islamic, Hindu dharma, and Jewish religions, marriage is considered to be divinely ordained, a sacred, religious act not to be entered into lightly. In these religions, marriage is viewed as a lifelong commitment between a woman and a man. Within these religious communities, the sacrament or act of marriage is believed to be the strongest of all social bonds around which the rest of society is organized. This bond, in turn,

initiates the new generations into the culture and traditions and facilitates further evolution of their civilization. It is the link that joins the past with the present and with the future in such a way that social transition and change can take place through a healthy and stable process. (Saad, 2002, p. 13)

In Chapter 8, we’ll examine the aspects of marriage as a religious commitment and sacred act.

Across the world, marriage is experienced as a civil union, a sacred act, a legal partnership or a social and/or economic union. There are also variations in marital types, such as monogamy and polygamy.

**Marital Types.** Marriages across the world are typically classified as either monogamous or polygamous. **Monogamy**, the legal structure of marriage recognized in the United States and in other Western civilizations, is a dyadic (two-person) form of marriage that involves the practice of having only one sexual partner. The sex partner reciprocates this exclusivity to his or her marital partner. The word monogamy refers solely to sexual exclusivity to one partner, but in the context of marriage there is also an expectation of exclusivity of emotional fidelity and love. **Monogamism** is the belief that monogamy is the only true morally and socially appropriate type of marriage or love relationship (Green et al., 2016).

In some non-Western cultures, exclusivity is not a right of marriage. Today, **polygamy**, the practice of having more than one marriage partner, is practiced by about 2 percent of the global population; it is most heavily concentrated in those regions where the Islamic faith dominates the culture, such as in Mali, where 34 percent of the population engages in this marital type (Pew Research Center, 2020). Generally, polygamy is a type of plural marriage wherein either multiple wives or multiple husbands exist. The practice is usually passed down from generation to generation and has existed throughout the recordings of history. In the biblical Old Testament, for instance, Abraham, David, and Solomon (who had 700 wives and 300 concubines, or mistresses) practiced polygamy. Likewise, in the 1500s, Martin Luther tolerated polygamy in instances where he believed the practice would “ensure the success of the Reformation” (Stack, 1998, p. 2).

**Polygyny** is one form of polygamy or plural marriage and involves the practice of a man having multiple wives at the same time. In the Islamic faith, polygyny is permitted by the Quran (Koran), and its practice is commonplace, with certain limitations. The popular television series *Sister Wives* depicts the daily lives of four women who are “married” to the same man. This family belongs to a nonconformist sect of Mormons. In a polygynous marriage, a woman is simultaneously the sister and co-wife of another. Along with small pockets of nonconformist Mormons who practice polygyny in the United

States, many Native American tribes allow the practice of polygyny. In his essay on the practical aspects of polygamy, polygamist Samuel Chapman denotes the benefits of plural marriages for women, citing, among other things, the availability of built-in childcare, the lack of pressure that husbands may feel to commit adultery, and the availability of a female friend for life.



Although the practice of having more than one marriage partner was banned by the Mormon church in the late 1880s, today some nonconformist segments of the church still practice polygamy.

Stephan Gladieu/Getty Images

Why would a woman choose to live in a relationship with multiple wives? Why would a woman choose to emotionally, physically, and sexually share her husband with other women? Mary Ben David (2005) notes that many benefits of her polygamous marriage, particularly in the areas of shared house-keeping, cooking, and childcare. She furthers notes that with several women in her home, her identity “cannot be wrapped up in her husband’s identity.”

**Polyandry** is another form of polygamy in which women have multiple husbands at the same time. Researchers have identified 53 societies that permit polyandrous unions, and they note that although polyandry is rare, it is common in egalitarian (classless) societies (Starkweather & Hames, 2012; Kuiper, 2024). These husbands are typically brothers. In polyandrous relationships, the woman mates with more than one male. This is a rare sexual mating system, even in the animal kingdom. Polyandry is a common practice among families in Tibet, where it is considered a wealth-conserving kinship mechanism (Goldstein, 1987/2002). According to anthropologist Melvin Goldstein, polyandry is practiced as a means of preventing or prohibiting the family’s estate from being divided too many ways and thereby diminishing the family’s overall wealth. When brothers share a wife, it is seen as the means by which the family’s quality of life is sustained and the way to maximize economic advantage, generation to generation.

**Cenogamy** is a form of marriage often referred to as “group marriage.” In this type of marital community, every man and every woman is married to each other at the same time. This form of marriage allows casual, indiscriminate sexual activity among all its members. Today, the practice of cenogamy is most often found in communal living—when a group of people live together and share property and resources—such as in tribal cultures. This form of marriage is not legal in the United States.

Now that you have a good understanding of the historical and legal definitions of marriage and family, let’s take a look at how people view couple relationships and marriage today.

## Understanding Couple Relationships: Shifting Views

Our attitudes and beliefs about coupling, marriage, parenting, and family life are largely shaped by the society in which we live. Several distinct generations comprise the demographic fabric of the United States. Not surprisingly, each generation's attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles form the underpinnings of their approaches to intimate and family relationships.

**The Silent Generation.** Born between 1928 and 1945, the silent generation is often referred to as “traditionalists.” Many fought in the Korean and Vietnam wars in an era of conformity. Although this generation ushered in the Civil Rights movement in 1964 and brought to light issues of racism and other issues of inequality, by and large they conformed to the traditional views of marriage, family, and divorce. Commonly, divorce wasn't viewed as a realistic option (Goldberg Jones, 2018; Gayle et al., 2021).

**Baby Boomers.** Boomers were born between 1946 and 1965. This rebellious drug, sex, and rock and roll generation welcomed resistance to the established values and norms in U.S. culture. Pushing the traditional boundaries of the silent generation, this “Me generation” caused great cultural change by putting individual needs ahead of marriage and family needs. Baby Boomers emphasized climbing the career ladder over the importance of family. Living together before marriage increased. Because couples devoted more time to career success than to marriage and family, divorce increased. Women poured into the workforce, creating an increase in dual-income households. Birth control options freed women to dictate their fertility and childbearing. Still today, Baby Boomers divorce more than any other age group (Goldberg Jones, 2018; Gayle et al., 2021).

**Generation X.** Generation X, or Gen Exers, were born between 1965 and 1980. Because Boomers experienced such high divorce rates, Gen X was the first generation to have divorced parents as a common experience. They were also the first generation to commonly experience stepfamily living. Interestingly, Gen Exers reacted to their parents' divorces by staying married for much longer and at much higher rates than their parents (Goldberg Jones, 2018).

**Millennials** Born between 1981 and 1996, Millennials are blamed for just about all of society's problems—from killing shopping malls and bars of soap to dinner dates and straws. But unlike the generations before them, Millennials not only put off marriage longer, they're opting to start families before marriage or forgo marriage all together. Their views on established gender roles are also impacting society's traditional views on the meaning of “male” and “female” (Goldberg Jones, 2018).

**Generation Z.** Generation Z, or the “iGeneration,” are those born after 1997. It's still too early to know how Generation Z will shape our society's views on couple relationships, marriage, and family. But one thing is for certain: Given the sway of technology on how people communicate and relate to one another, it will be interesting to see how the “i everything” impacts intimate and marital relationships and parenting practices. Just as the television changed Boomers' connections to their world, so, too, will technology change lifestyles and relationships (Dimock, 2019).

Just as there are differences in how we can experience marriage, there are also differences in how each of us defines and experiences family.

## WHAT IS FAMILY?

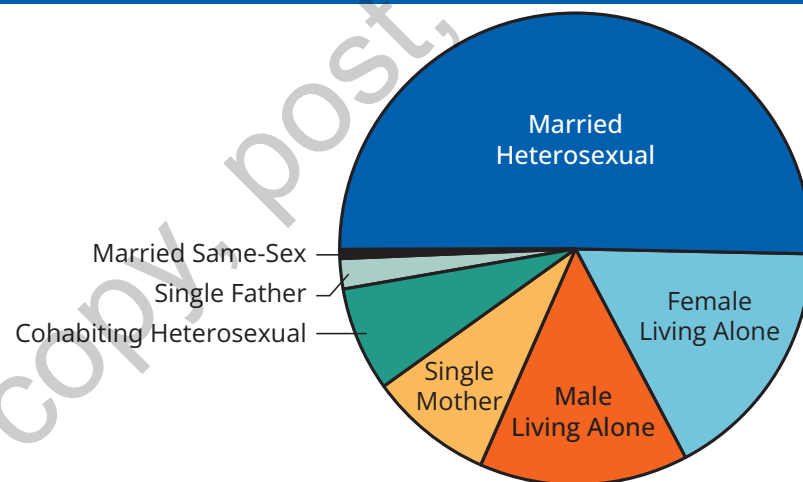
What is “family?” How do you define it? In all likelihood, your definition may be entirely different from the federal government's definition, or from mine. The reason for these differences is that my definition and your definition of family are based on our *unique experiences within our own families*. Throughout this book, I will be sharing some of my family life experiences with you as I ask you to explore aspects of your family life that have helped shape who you are. Your professor or instructor may also share stories of family life, as may your classmates. As you exchange stories, you might find that you share similar family experiences. Most likely, you will have some experiences that are vastly different from any you have heard or read about.

According to the United States Census Bureau (2024), a **family** “is a group of two people or more (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together; all such people (including related subfamily members) are considered as members of one family.” On the other hand, a **household**,

consists of all the people who occupy a housing unit. A household includes the related family members and all the unrelated people, if any, such as lodgers, foster children, wards, or employees who share the housing unit. A person living alone in a housing unit, or a group of unrelated people sharing a housing unit such as partners or roomers, is also counted as a household. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024)

Thus, according to the federal government, a married couple and their children are considered to be a family, whereas intimate couples who live together who are not married make up a household. In nearly all societies the world over, the family is the social unit that is responsible for nurturing, protecting, educating, and socializing children (Barbour et al., 2005; Perelli-Harris et al., 2017). Figure 1.1 illustrates for us the types of households in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023b). As you can see, nearly one half (48 percent) of all households today are heterosexual married-couple families, but there is great diversity in family forms (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023b). A **nonfamily household** consists of a householder living alone, such as a widow, or a householder sharing the home with people to whom she or he is not related, such as a widow sharing her home with two friends. Not only has the distribution of households shifted over time, so too has the size of U.S. households. For example, in 1970, the average household size was 3.14, whereas today it is 2.51 (Statista, 2023a).

**FIGURE 1.1** ■ Types of Households in the United States, 2023



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). *Current population survey: Annual social and economic supplement*. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2023/demo/families/cps-2023.html>

The question arises, then, whether it is possible to arrive at a one-size-fits-all definition of “family,” as the U.S. Census Bureau describes. Probably not, for there exist as many definitions or descriptions of “family” as there are students who are reading this textbook, and more. The concept of family is, indeed, a subjective notion.

Each of us begins our relational journey in our family of origin or family of orientation. Our **family of origin** is the family into which we are born or brought by adoption. It is the family in which we are raised and socialized to adhere to the customs and norms of the culture in which we live. And, just as important, it is within the family of origin we learn how to love and to be intimate with others. The **family of procreation** is the family unit that is formed when we marry and produce children. As we explore the nature of today’s families, we use statistics to help us identify current patterns and trends. Although it is sometimes tempting to skip over statistics when reading, numbers are necessary because they present overall trends and provide us with an instant snapshot—and understanding—of U.S. families.



## Nuclear and Extended Families

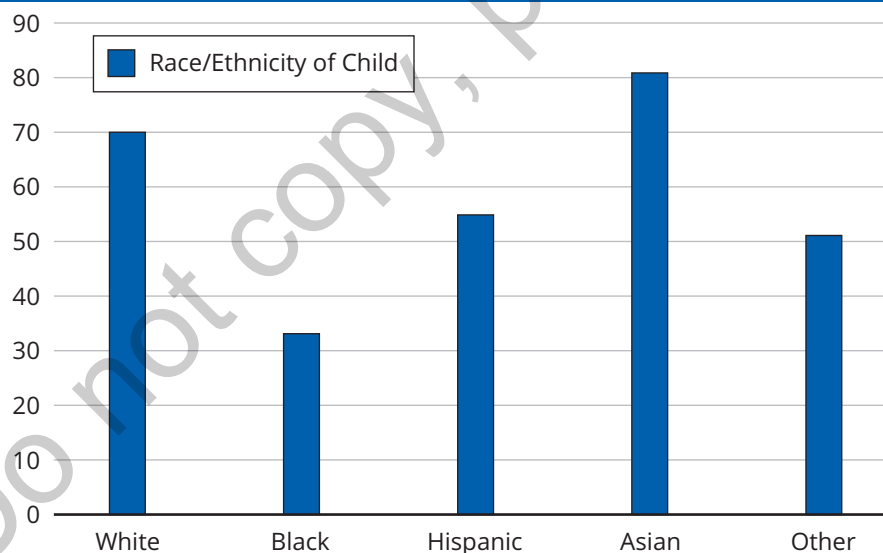
Today, it is essential that students of intimate couple and family life know the differing arrangements of families because this understanding allows human service providers and other family professionals to more effectively support, value, and work with diverse families (Segal-Engelchin & Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2023).

In essence, **diversity** refers to the broad spectrum of demographic and philosophical differences among groups of people within a culture. When we talk about being **diverse**, or about diversity in the United States, we are referring to people's differences in age, gender, race, ethnicity, cultures, sexual orientation, sexual identity, and religions (Servaes et al., 2022). When we talk about being diverse when studying families, we are referring to the varying ways in which people experience coupling and family life. When we study people from a diversity perspective, we not only broaden our knowledge base about the variances in marriage and family, but we value individuals and groups, free from bias and preconceptions. This, then, fosters a climate of equity and mutual respect. In the sections that follow, we'll first take a look at nuclear and extended family forms. We'll then examine the expanding family landscape in our culture today.

### Nuclear Family

The **nuclear family** consists of a father, a mother, and their biological or adopted children. In the truest sense of the definition, nuclear families consist of first-time married parents, their biological or adopted children, and no other family members living in the home. In 2023, the "typical" nuclear family form was found in about 37 percent of family households (Pew Research Center, 2023a); Figure 1.2 shows us the racial and ethnic differences in nuclear family composition today. As you can see, there are continuing gaps across racial and ethnic groups in the experiences of children living with both biological parents, such as only one third of Black children living with their married birth parents (Institute for Family Studies, 2024).

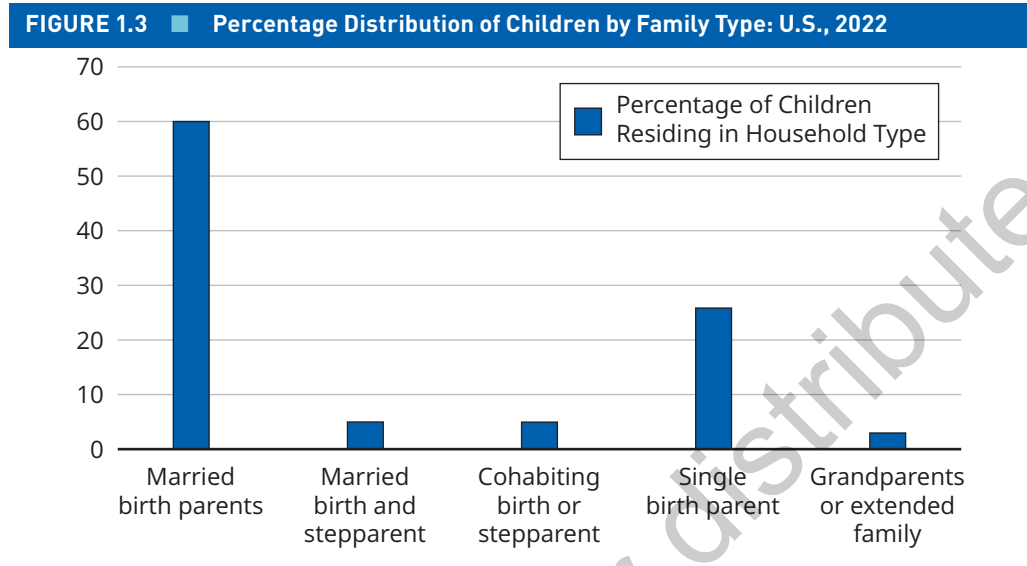
**FIGURE 1.2** ■ Percentage of Children Living with Married Birth Parents by Race/Ethnicity: U.S. 2022



Source: Institute for Family Studies. (2024). *The resurgence of the two parent family*. Retrieved from <https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-resurgence-of-the-two-parent-family>

As Figure 1.3 presents for us, there are many family configurations in which children in the United States live today. Notice that although the majority of children live in two-parent families, other family forms show the complexity of contemporary family living. For example, among parents living with a child, a growing share of unmarried parents are cohabiting: In 2017, 35 percent of unmarried parents were cohabiting, in comparison to 13 percent in 1968 (Pew Research Center, 2018a). Today, over one

fourth of American children live with a single parent (Institute for Family Studies, 2024). We'll discuss cohabiting parents at length later in this chapter.



Source: Institute for Family Studies. (2024). *The resurgence of the two parent family*. <https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-resurgence-of-the-two-parent-family>

Often, the nuclear family is referred to as the *traditional* family. This term carries with it a conventional depiction of the family form and the accompanying family values and traditions. *Family values* is a term that is commonly used today by politicians and TV news reports, although it may mean different things to different people. Most often, **family values** refers to a society's paradigm or viewpoint that expects its members to adhere to perceived proper social roles, such as marrying and having children, remaining monogamous and faithful to the marriage partner, and opposing same-sex relationships, marriages, and parenting by gay or lesbian partners. The family values viewpoint also frowns on births to women outside of marriage. It evokes a certain set of ascribed gender roles; for example, the women fulfill homemaker and mothering responsibilities (the bread maker role), and the men fulfill the role of primary wage earner (the breadwinner role). This particular family form is also considered a patriarchy, wherein the male is dominant and is in charge of most decision making in the family.

Historian and author Peter McWilliams (1998) offers insight into the roots of the traditional family. He notes that the modern concept of two adults rearing their children under a single roof grew out of necessity during the Middle Ages, when the minimum number of people required to own and maintain a plot of land was two. In order to multiply their wealth, they needed others to work the land; children were free labor. Thus, in order to have the free labor provided by children, it was economically necessary that one of the adults was a man and the other was a woman—and they were thus paired until death. According to McWilliams, love had nothing to do with the pairing:

Even if a husband and a wife hated each other, all they had to do was wait a little while—with disease, war, childbirth, and an average lifespan of about 25, most marriages lasted less than five years. The departed partner was immediately replaced, and the system continued.

Men and older children worked the land, and the women tended to the livestock, the crops near the home, and the younger children. Because the system worked so well, the church eventually got involved and, over time, the one-man/one-woman for life theology emerged.

If we were to identify a specific period in American history that the traditional family form was in vogue, we would look at the period of the 1950s in the United States (McWilliams, 1998). The high postwar marriage and birth rates, coupled with a prosperous economy in which a single wage earner could support a family, led to a national perception of the period as a “golden era” for families (McWilliams, 1998).

Through the television and the media, families tuned in to watch the idealized image of the American family: the wise, reassuring father who came home from a hard day at the office; the apron-clad homemaker mother (wearing pearls and heels and lipstick) who offered comfort and support to her hardworking husband and perfect children; the clutter-free, immaculate home; and the homogenous neighborhood. Notes McWilliams (1998), the family life portrayed in the 1950s media was wholesome: There were no single parents (unless the father was a widower, such as with the fathers in *My Three Sons*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, and *Bonanza*), no infidelities, no divorce, no abuse, no teen runaways, no financial problems, no stress, and no prior marriages or children from prior marriages. There was no discussion about religion. Politics. The economy. No one lost his job. There was no violence in the home or school or neighborhood. There was no drug usage. No racism. No homosexuality. And no babies born out of wedlock.

Despite TV Land's depiction of the American family during this era, like *Leave It to Beaver*, it is questionable whether this idealized image of family really ever existed. Author and professor of comparative family history Stephanie Coontz notes the discrepancies between the idealized 1950s "good old days" family form portrayed in the media and the reality of family living during the 1950s (Coontz, 1992, 1999):

- About one quarter of the population lived below the poverty line.
- The number of pregnant brides more than doubled from the 1940s.
- From 1944 to 1955, the number of babies born outside of marriage and relinquished for adoption rose 80 percent.
- Juvenile delinquency was so prevalent that in 1955 Congress considered nearly 200 bills to address the social problem.

As Coontz notes, the 1950s were a dismal time for women, minorities, gays and lesbians, and any other social group that did not "fit in" with the images typified on the television screen.

The traditional nuclear family is no longer predominant in the United States. In the 21st century, 1950s television shows like *I Love Lucy* have been replaced by shows such as *Family Guy*, *Modern Family*, *Black-ish*, and *A Million Little Things*, which better reflect the diversity found in today's families.



Which child abuses substances? Which child has behavioral problems in school? Which child copes with mental health issues? Is this a nuclear family or a stepfamily? In the 1950s, we would never know because these real-life problems were never addressed. The television and media portrayed an idealized image of the American family: The breadwinning dad, the bread maker mom, and the practically perfect children who all live in their always-perfectly-kept home.

AP Photo/David F. Smith

## FAMILY LIFE NOW

### Is the American Family Deteriorating?

So prominent are the changes in the structures and experiences of the American family over the past 40 years that great debate erupted during many political campaigns in the 2018 election cycle about the "family values" of America. Is the American family deteriorating?

**YES:** Founder of the National Marriage Project, author David Popenoe asserts that the American family is in a state of deterioration. "It is well known that there has been a weakening of marriage and the nuclear family in advanced, industrialized societies, especially since the 1960s" (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2005, p.2). According to Dr. John DeFrain, professor of family studies for more than four decades, most families today in the United States are "doing well and are satisfied with their lives" (DeFrain, 2018). DeFrain does, however, point out that when looking at American families top

down—from the *macro level*—there are difficulties families are facing; these difficulties, in turn, affect the form and functions of today's families:

- Increased number of couples opting to cohabit before marriage or instead of marriage
- Increased number of out-of-wedlock births
- Increased number of women in the workforce
- Increased number of children living in non-nuclear families
- Increased numbers of those living in poverty
- Increase in domestic and intimate partner violence
- Increase in alcohol-related problems
- Increase in substance use
- Decrease in marital satisfaction and happiness

Other research indicates that the changes in family structure significantly impact children's health and well-being (Anderson, 2014; Hadfield & Ungar, 2018; Gruning Parache et al. 2023). These findings align with what other family scientists were finding in 1996: that all of the trends seen in family structure—"the breakdown of family and the erosion of family values"—affect children significantly (National Issues Forum, 1996). These impacts are seen in the increased incidence of teen violence, teen pregnancy, and teen substance abuse (Hadfield & Ungar, 2018).

**NO:** Other scholars believe that the family is in a continuous state of change, as it always has been, in order to adapt to societal influences. For example, the first settlers in America experienced extended family forms in order to adjust to their harsh environmental conditions; as life improved, family structures reflected this change. A scientist for the Institute for Social and Behavioral Research, Rand Conger (Conger & Conger, 2002) studied today's emerging family systems and made these conclusions:

- The *quality* of parenting—not the experience of nuclear adult relationships—teaches children and adolescents how to behave in marital relationships.
- The *quality* of the parents' relationship did not directly influence how young adults experience their own adult relationships.
- The *quality* of parenting (nurturing and affectionate versus harsh and angry) influences whether children/adolescents use drugs, become teen parents, or engage in teen violence—not whether the child is reared in a single-parent home or stepfamily.

And some contend that the American family is not deteriorating but is adapting to the social changes brought by diversity of races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations. Dr. John DeFrain (2018) echoes these findings. He asserts that if we examine families face-to-face—the *micro level*—we will see that families around the world are incredibly diverse and that *function* (not structure) is the most important aspect of family health and well-being. He rightly states, "Strong families tend to produce great kids" (p. 78).

### What Do You Think?

1. Are the trends we see in today's families a result of change or deterioration?
2. Where do you see the American family in the year 2030? 2050?

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Sources: National Issues Forum (1996); Popenoe and Whitehead (2005); Conger and Conger (2002).

### Extended Family

The **extended family** is typically defined as a family unit in which two or more generations of close family relatives live together in one household. There are three common extended family configurations:

1. A mother and father with children (may be married or not), with one or more grandparents
2. A mother and father with children (may be married or not), with at least one unmarried sibling of the parents or another relative, such as a cousin
3. A divorced, separated, or never-married single parent with children, in addition to a grandparent, sibling, or other relative (Barbour et al., 2005)

This type of extended or multigenerational family structure was the basic element of slave life in the 19th century and remains today an integral part of the lives of many families, particularly families of color. For example, families with African roots often experience close-knit, multigenerational family groups—in addition to parents and children, family members may be grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Today, about 57 percent of African American/Black Caribbean children have lived in an extended family home, compared to 20 percent of white children (Banerjee, 2019). Similarly, about 35 percent of Hispanic children have lived in an extended family home. Overall, 17 percent of all children in the United States live in an extended family household (Banerjee, 2019). No data exist to determine how many extended family members live nearby (not necessarily with) other family members, but we know that multigenerational family members can provide much emotional and economic support, along with the richness of family legacy and heritage.

## The Expanding Family Landscape

In the United States today, there is no such thing as a “traditional” or “typical” family configuration. In order to better serve today’s families and to help them reach their full potentials, we need to understand the changing compositions of contemporary families, as well as the racial and ethnic compositions of families.

### Single-Parent Families

Today, one in three (34 percent) U.S. parents is unmarried (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023e; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024). **Single-parent family** types can be the result of the choice of the parent or of circumstance; they can result from divorce, the death of a spouse, or unmarried parenthood. Trends indicate that single-parent households are on the increase in the American family: In the past 10 years, the number of children who live with two married parents has decreased from 68 percent to 65 percent; however, in the United States, the rate of children under the age of 18 who live with only one parent is more than three times the rate of children around the world (Institute for Family Studies, 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, 2023e). Table 1.1 illustrates children’s living arrangements from 1970 to 2022. Although the percentage of children living with no parents has remained relatively stable over the past nearly 50 years, the percentage of children living with unmarried parents has increased, while those living with two parents has decreased. Understanding these trends in single-parenting experiences is important because as our study will show us in just a bit, single parents often live in poverty—which, in turn, affects their children’s development.

**TABLE 1.1** ■ Children’s Living Arrangements by Presence of Parents in the Home, 1970–2023

Percentage of children who live with. . . .						
	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2022
<b>2 Parents</b>	85.2	76.7	72.5	69.1	69.4	65.0
<b>Single Parents</b>	11.9	19.7	24.7	26.7	26.6	34.0
<b>No Parents</b>	2.9	3.7	2.8	4.2	4.1	5.0

Sources: Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS-ASEC) 1970–2010 and CPS March, 2018. Retrieved April 10, 2019, from [www.ifstudies.org](http://www.ifstudies.org); ChildStats Forum on Child and Family Statistics. (2023). *Family structure and children’s living arrangements*. [www.childstats.gov](http://www.childstats.gov); The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2024).

### Childless/Childfree Families

Couples may consider themselves **childless** if they are unable to conceive or bear children of their own or adopt children. Some couples today prefer to remain **childfree** as a conscious choice. And although they’re waiting longer to have children, older women are more likely to have children today than a decade ago. Today, 84 percent of women aged 40 to 44 are mothers, in comparison to 80 percent in 2006 (National Health Statistics Report, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2018b). The U.S. Census

Bureau measures the presence of children primarily by examining the **general fertility rate** (the ratio of the number of live births per 1,000 women of childbearing age). In 2018, there were 58 births for every 1,000 women aged 15 to 44; this is a decrease from nearly 63 births for every 1,000 women aged 15 to 44 in 2015 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2023). The typical American family today has an average of 1.9 children under 18; this is a decrease from the average number of 2.44 children per family in 1970 (Statista, 2023b).

It is important to note, however, that this is not the first generation of people who are deciding not to have children. Notes Philip Morgan, professor of sociology at Duke University,

Childlessness is not new, [but] in the past it was more closely connected with non-marriage than now. During the Depression, many Americans also chose not to have children because they could not afford them. Childlessness levels are not higher than those in the 1930s. (Taylor, 2005)

Morgan adds that there are many factors involved in couples' decision to remain childfree today. We discuss the childless/childfree contemporary trends in depth in Chapter 10.

### Stepfamilies

In the United States, 1,300 new families are formed every day (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023b). A **stepfamily** (or reconstituted family) is formed when, after death or divorce, a parent marries again. A stepfamily is also formed when a never-married parent marries and children from different biological families end up living with the new married couple for part of the time. In short, the presence of a stepparent, stepsibling, or half sibling designates a family as a stepfamily (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019b).

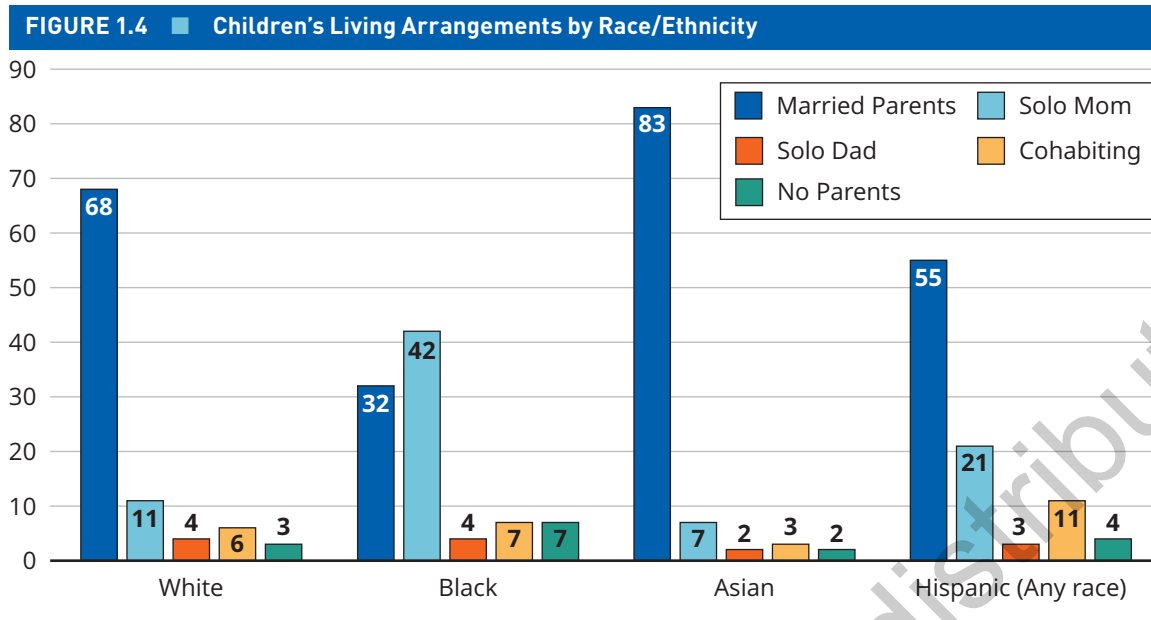
The U.S. Census Bureau no longer provides data related to marriage, divorce, and remarriage, so it is difficult to obtain accurate statistics about stepfamilies. But census experts today estimate that one in three Americans—about 33 percent—is now either a stepparent, a stepchild, a stepsibling, or some other member of a stepfamily (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023b). Although the popular 1970s television show *The Brady Bunch* portrayed stepfamily living as an emotionally cohesive, trouble-free, happily adjusted family, this idealized concept of the stepfamily form is simply not the norm. (Because of the complexities of stepfamily living, an entire segment is devoted to this family form in Chapter 14).

### Cohabiting Families

Unmarried partners who live together in a single household are referred to as **cohabiting** couples. Although once considered a scandalous, uncommon alternative lifestyle, cohabiting before marriage (or instead of marriage) is now the prevailing living arrangement of intimate partners—the next step following serious dating (Nugent & Daugherty, 2018; Reynolds & Brown, 2020). The U.S. Census Bureau today estimates that 10 percent of all adults in the United States are cohabiting (Marino, 2022). In 2018, cohabitation was a more common living arrangement of children than living with a single parent. For example, while 3.5 percent of children lived with an unmarried parent, 4.2 percent lived with a parent and the parent's unmarried partner (Institute for Family Studies, 2019). This was a significant increase from 2007, when the percentage of children living with unmarried single parents and cohabiting parents was nearly identical (2.6 percent and 2.9 percent, respectively). Today, 8 percent of all American children live with cohabiting parents (ChildStats, 2023; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024). Indeed, 51 percent of women's first marriages are preceded by cohabitation (Institute for Family Studies, 2019). The rates of cohabiting parents vary by race; these data are presented in Figure 1.4. We discuss the multifaceted aspects of cohabitation in Chapter 7.

### Gay and Lesbian Families

Lesbian and gay families consist of same-sex partners who live together in the same household; they may include either natural-born or adopted children. In the United States today, there are 1.2 million same-sex households, up from 780,000 same-sex households in 2011 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019c; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Census Bureau statisticians point out, however, that this increase reflects the fact that same-sex families were previously uncounted, undercounted, or underreported, and not that



Source: Westrick-Payne, K. K., & Wiborg, C. E. (2021). *Children's family structure, 2021. Family Profiles, FP-21-26*. National Center for Family & Marriage Research. <https://doi.org/10.25035/ncfmr/fp-21-26>.

the numbers of gay or lesbian families have increased significantly (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019c). Same-sex family forms may or may not resemble traditional marriage roles, but they often do. Legally married today, they share property, expect sexual fidelity, and share joint responsibility in child rearing.

In the LGBTQ+ community, **chosen family**—nonbiological kinship bonds—replaces blood family and becomes the bedrock of trust, support, and love; sometimes, LGBTQ+ individuals live with their chosen family (Carlson & Dermer, 2017; Hull, 2018). Kathleen Hull (2018), professor of sociology and gender, women, and sexuality studies, notes that many LGBTQ+ individuals do not receive support and acceptance from their blood relatives, and because of this they have formed nonbiological families with people who do love and support them. Another social scientist observes, “Until the world is a more inclusive place, [chosen family] will continue to exist within the LGBT community” (Mitchell, 2008).



Today, there are 1.2 million same-sex households in the United States, and nearly one quarter of a million children live with their same-sex parents.

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## Immigrant Families With Children

**Immigrants** are people who reside permanently in the United States but were not U.S. citizens at birth. Immigrant families with children are families in which at least one parent was born outside of the United States. From 1990 to 2022, the population of immigrant children grew from 8.2 million to 17.6 million; 87 percent of these children are U.S. born and are American citizens (Migration Policy Institute, 2022). First-generation immigrant children are those who were born outside of the United States; second-generation immigrant children are those who were born in America to immigrant parents. The growth we've seen in numbers of immigrant children are due to second-generation immigrants. In 2017, more than one half (54 percent) of all immigrant children were of Hispanic origin (Child Trends, 2018). Non-Hispanic Asian children comprised 17 percent of immigrant children. About 25 percent of first- and second-generation immigrant children live below the federal poverty level (Child Trends, 2018). Today, one in four children in the United States has at least one immigrant parent; about 7 percent of all children residing in the United States [REJECT] are children of undocumented immigrant parents (Children's Defense Fund, 2023). In Chapter 10 we'll take an in-depth look at this growing family form.

Our study so far has shown us that in the 21st century, it is hard to encapsulate or sum up the "typical" American family—it simply doesn't exist today in our complex, multifaceted, everchanging, global society. To get the full grasp of intimate, marriage, and family relationships, we now need to examine the racial and ethnic characteristics of contemporary families.

## CONTEMPORARY FAMILIES

Is the American family in a state of decline, or is it in a state of change? As we have seen so far, the "traditional" family form is no longer the norm in American culture, and today's intimate relationships and families are experiencing a number of changes. The family structures, values, and attitudes we observe today are a result of changes that have evolved over the past five or six decades.

As the United States moved into the second half of the 20th century, a number of social, cultural, economic, and political changes occurred that continue to have an impact on today's 21st-century families and family living: Social and cultural changes include lower birth rates and an increase in non-marital cohabitation; economic factors include the influx of women into the workforce; and political factors include legalized abortion in 1973 and the Civil Rights legislation of 1965, which bans racial, ethnic, sexual, and sexual orientation discrimination.

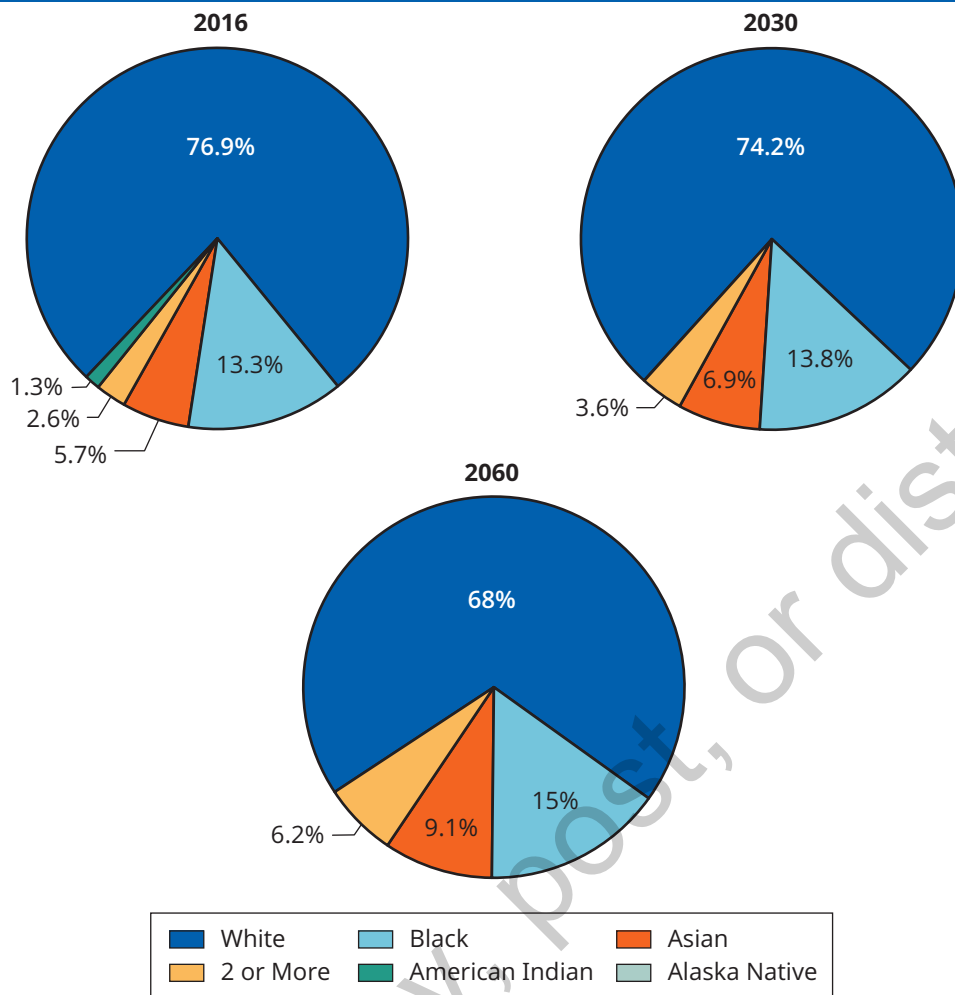
All of these factors worked in tandem to change the traditional family in this century. Experts in the field of marriage and family living, however, view the changes occurring during the last half of the 20th century differently. Those with more conventional, conservative, or religious outlooks are concerned about what they perceive to be a moral decline in family life—that is, the increase in nonmarital cohabitation and same-sex relationships and in the number of births outside of marriage. These groups prescribe a return to more conventional, long-held family values as a way to reverse the trends (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2005). Those with a more contemporary outlook hold that these trends represent both flexibility and adaptability in today's families and in the society at large (Solot & Miller, 2004). In spite of increasing relational and economic stresses faced by today's families, marriage represents the most frequently chosen family form, with approximately 93 percent of the population choosing marriage at least once (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019d).

In the United States, there is more diversity now than ever before. Families today are complex and diverse, ranging from traditional two-biological-parent family structures, to single-parent homes, to extended family forms, to married gay or lesbian couples. There is also greater diversity of racial, ethnic, economic, and religious composition, and so social workers, family life educators, psychologists, sociologists, and health and mental health professionals must be aware of the full range of diversity in families today (see Figure 1.5).

Knowing the racial and ethnic composition of U.S. families is important because it aids in our understanding of the complex, changing nature of family living. Here, we briefly examine the racial and ethnic compositions of families so that you have a firm understanding of the diversity within the United States.



**FIGURE 1.5** ■ Racial and Ethnic Composition of American Families: Projected Population by Race, 2016–2060



Source: Vespa, J., Armstrong, D. M., and Medina, L. (2018). *Demographic turning points for the United States: Population projections for 2020 to 2060, Current population reports, P25-1144*. U.S. Census Bureau.

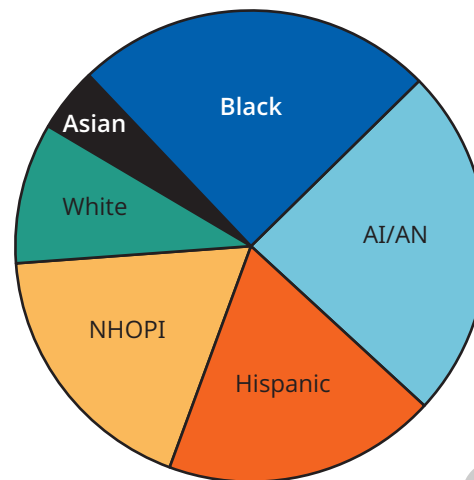
### African American/Black Caribbean Families

Historically, African American/Black Caribbean families assumed the traditional married-couple family structure, with children born inside the marital union. Today, it is common for Black children to be born to a single mother. As Figure 1.6 illustrates, 70 percent of the births to Black women of all ages are to unmarried women (National Vital Statistics Report, 2023). In comparison to white families, where three fourths (75 percent) live in a married-parent home, one half of Black children live in a single-parent home (OJJDP, 2024). Eventually, 43 percent of Black children reside in two-parent homes, but many of these families are formed with a child who was born outside of marriage (OJJDP, 2024).

Multigenerational, extended family ties are common among Black families. Census bureau data estimate that about 26 percent of African American/Black Caribbean children live in some type of extended family (Pew Research Center, 2022). According to a study by Noelle St. Vil and her colleagues (2018), characteristics of African American/Black Caribbean extended family networks include the following:

- Strong commitment to family and family obligation
- Availability of and willingness to provide childcare
- Reinforcement of social skills and family values in children

**FIGURE 1.6** ■ Percentage of All Births That Were to Unmarried Women, by Race and Hispanic Origin



\*NHOPI: Native Hawaiian Other Pacific Islander

\*AI/AN: American Indian/Alaska Native

Source: National Vital Statistics Report. (2023). Births: Final data for 2021. *National Vital Statistics Report*, 72(1), 1-53. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr72/nvsr72-01.pdf>

- Willingness to allow relatives and close nonrelatives to move into the family home
- Strong network of emotional support
- Strengthen marriages by protecting against the inability to meet responsibilities of multiple roles
- Close system of mutual aid and support

Because of the large numbers of female-headed households among African American/Black Caribbeans, some research suggests that the childrearing and economic support of extended kin is necessary; it is within the extended family networks of grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, uncles, and cousins that children are cared for, socialized, educated, and have their emotional needs met (Taylor, 2000). Of all racial and ethnic groups in the United States, African American/Black Caribbean families suffer some of the highest levels of unemployment and poverty and the lowest median family income—slightly more than \$53,000 annually (Guzman & Kollar, 2023).

### Latin Families

**Latin** are people of Latin American origin or descent. Latina is the term often used to describe women of Latin American descent; the term Latino is used by the U.S. government as an ethnic descriptor for Latin Americans. Some use the term *Latinx*; however, recent studies show that 97 percent of those who identify as Latin, Hispanic, Latina, or Latino do not embrace this term (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020; Pew Research Center, 2023b; Salinas & Loranzo, 2021). Today, Latin Americans account for nearly 18 percent of the total U.S. population; this figure does not include the 3 million residents of the U.S. territory Puerto Rico (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). This population traces their roots to Spain, Mexico, and the Spanish-speaking nations of Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. The fastest-growing population in the United States because of the large proportion of Latin women of childbearing age, the Hispanic population of the United States is nearly 64 million (19 percent of the total U.S. population), making people of Hispanic origin the nation's largest ethnic or racial minority (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023c).

Latin people place a high value on familialism, which emphasizes the importance of family life, and close, interdependent relationships among the person, the family, and the community (among



Latin families enjoy the rich, multigenerational relationships of extended family members and nonrelated kin who become as close as blood relatives. Latin families embrace familism: The best interests of the family are placed ahead of the interests of the individual family member.

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many, Constante et al., 2019; Stein et al., 2019). Typically, familism also stresses the importance of extended family; thus, Latin families are also composed of extended kinship networks (grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins). Within this family dynamic, family members are provided clothing, shelter, food, education, and emotional support. People of Hispanic origin further extend family relationships to **fictive kin** (nonrelated members), such as godparents and close friends. Within Latin communities, the well-being of the family takes precedence over the well-being of the individual.

As you saw earlier in this chapter, Latin children often have families in which at least one parent is an immigrant—foreign born—or are themselves foreign born. Today, one out of four U.S. children is living in an immigrant family (Migration Policy Institute, 2023). Latin immigrants and their children commonly live within extended family forms during the first 10 years following immigration (Carranza et al., 2002). Even as immigrants establish their own households, they do so nearby their families' homes. Second- and third-generation Hispanic Americans have even larger extended kin networks than do immigrants (Carranza et al., 2002).

About 55 percent of Latin children live in two-parent families (Westrick-Payne & Wilborg, 2021). Similar to the experiences of African American/Black Caribbean women, births to unmarried Latin women have increased since the 1970s. Approximately 50 percent of all Hispanic origin births are to unmarried women (Westrick-Payne & Wilborg, 2021). Currently, 21 percent of Latin children live in a household with their mothers and have no father present; 13 percent live in an extended, multigenerational family household with grandparents, and less than 2 percent live with their grandparents only (Chen & Guzman, 2022).

Educational attainment varies among this population. In the United States today, Latin families earn, on average, about \$63,000 per year (Guzman & Kollar, 2023). It's important to keep in mind that many Hispanic immigrants may have had successful businesses in other countries or professional degrees from other countries, but because of the language barrier when they arrive in the United States, they are unable to secure high-paying jobs.

## Asian American Families

Asian American families come to the United States from countries including Korea, Japan, China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia. Each Asian country has a unique culture, which accounts for the vast cultural and ethnic differences within this racial group. Like Latin families, Asian American families place great emphasis on extended kinship ties and the needs of the entire family, rather than on the needs of the individual. About 83 percent of all Asian American children live with both biological parents; only 7 percent live in mother-only families, and about 2 percent live in father-only families (Flood et al., 2021). Today, about 13 percent of Asian women give birth outside of marriage (National Vital Statistics Report, 2023). With an annual income of more than \$108,700 per year, Asian American families have the highest median household income of all racial groups in the United States (Guzman & Kollar, 2023). This is perhaps because Asian Americans have the highest educational attainment and qualifications of all ethnic groups in the United States—over 54 percent have earned at least a bachelor's degree (National Student Clearing House Research Center, 2023).

Asian American families are child-centric. Within the Asian family structure, a greater emphasis is placed on the parent–child relationship than on the husband–wife relationship. In exchange for the undivided loyalty and for sacrifices parents make for their children, Asian American parents expect respect and obedience from their children (Fong, 2002).

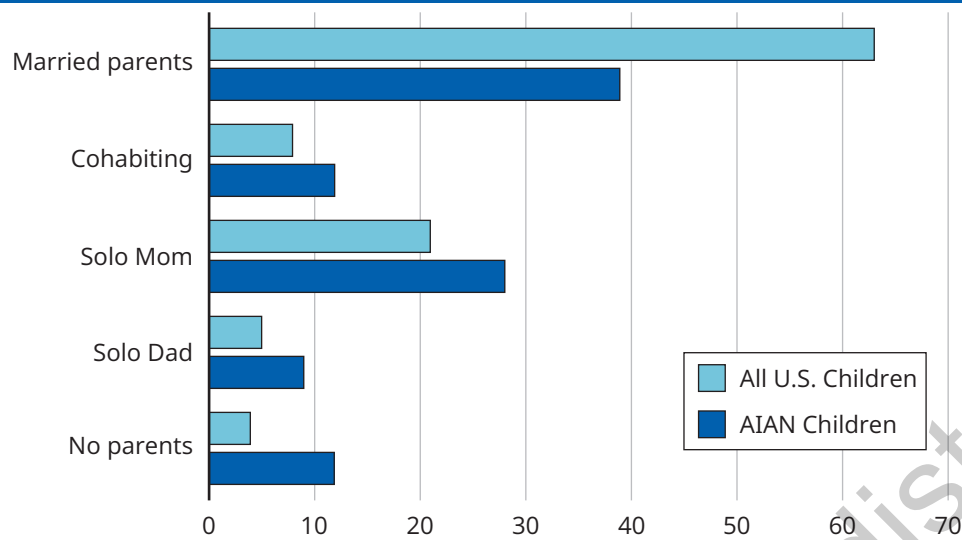
## Native American/Alaska Native Families

The terms *Native American*, *American Indian*, *Alaska Native*, and *Indian* are often used interchangeably. Here, we use the term **Native American/Alaska Native** to refer to aboriginal peoples of the United States and their descendants who maintain tribal affiliation or community attachment. Today, 3 percent of the total U.S. population reports that they are Native American or Alaska Native; since 2010, the number of people who identify as NA/AN has nearly doubled to 10 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023a). About one third of the population is under the age of 18, making this a young ethnic group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023a). As with other racial and ethnic groups in the United States, Native American or Alaska Native communities are culturally diverse, with 574 federally recognized Native entities and an additional 324 state-recognized American Indian tribes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023a). Native Americans prefer to be identified by tribal names, such as Wampanoag, Lakota, and Kickapoo (Fleming, 2007); our discussion here is generalized.

In order for us to accurately understand Native American marriage and family experiences, we must be aware of the unique qualities associated with this race. Unfortunately, comparatively little research has been conducted on Native American family life, and especially on Native American marriage. Despite this gap in the empirical literature, however, the census data do give us insight into some characteristics of Natives. For instance, nearly 40 percent of all Native American households are married couple households (see Figure 1.7). Interestingly, more than one third of households are nonfamily households; this means that a significant number of Native American families are headed by someone other than a parent, such as a grandparent, or even by nonfictive kin. Nearly 52 percent of Native grandparents assume responsibility for their grandchildren (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a). Although roughly 84 percent of this population has at least a high school diploma, the median household income of single-race American Indian and Alaska Native households is slightly less than \$50,000; this compares with \$72,000 for the nation as a whole (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2024). More than 12 percent of NA/AN people groups live below the poverty line (Around Him & Gordon, 2022).

The predominance of extended family/nonfictive kin households among NA/AN is a reflection of the cultural roots of this racial group. Native Americans/Alaska Natives embrace a social identity that stresses the importance of family ties. For example, when Native Americans introduce themselves to other Natives, they do so by telling them their maternal heritage, clans, and homelands (Makes Marks, 2007). In contrast to societies in which kinship is determined along patrilineal lines (the father's heritage), the roots of Native social and clan relationships are by and large matrilineal; that is to say, these societies trace their heritage from a female ancestor to a descendent of either sex. This is also referred to as a *uterine descent*. Within these societies, women are not given power per se because they are women—they are given power because of their status of mother, the power of female as mother.

**FIGURE 1.7** ■ Percentage: American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) Children's Living Arrangements



Source: Pourier, J., Chen, Y., & Around Him, D. (2023). American Indian and Alaska Native children live in diverse family structures. *Child Trends*. <https://doi.org/10.56417/2499a7141k>

Native Americans' spiritual traditions and religious beliefs are also numerous and diverse, and as such, the depth and dynamics of their religious experiences are difficult to categorize or classify. Even so, there is an underlying or essential principal belief that informs most Natives' spiritual practices: the belief in the existence of unseen powers, that something exists beyond them that is sacred and mysterious (Makes Marks, 2007). Within this belief are embedded tradition, respect, and reverence. But how these religious beliefs shape marital and family attitudes, norms, and behaviors is unknown, because Native Americans are among the most misunderstood and understudied ethnic group in our culture; this is because they are commonly culturally isolated (Hellerstedt et al., 2006).



Native Americans/Alaska Natives embrace rich cultural heritages and an identity that stresses the importance of intergenerational family ties. Native spiritual and religious beliefs are numerous and diverse, and the beliefs often shape their attitudes toward marriage and family life.

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## Muslim/Arab Americans

Very little empirical information exists about Muslim American families, although their population is increasing in the United States. Coming from countries such as Afghanistan, Israel, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Turkey, the term *Arab American* does not refer necessarily to a racial group as much as it does geographic location and religion, which among Middle Eastern families is very diverse. There are no U.S. government demographics on the number of Muslim Americans because the U.S. Census Bureau does not track information and trends on the religious practices of those who reside in the United States; however, the 2020 census included a write-in category in which this population could self-identify as *MENA* (Middle Eastern and North African) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023d). According to the Arab American Institute (2023), there are 3.7 million Muslims living in the United States; they account for about 1 percent of the total U.S. population. The fastest growing immigrant population today, 3 in 10 have immigrated to the United States since 2010 (Pew Research Center, 2017a). Nearly 82 percent of Muslim/Arab Americans are American citizens. Of those who were foreign born, nearly 70 percent have become naturalized U.S. citizens (Arab American Institute, 2023).

The most common living situation among Muslim Americans is a multigenerational household; 57 percent live in this type of home configuration (Pew Research Center, 2017a). Nearly 20 percent live in a home with non-Muslims (such as a spouse). The Islamic faith is a sex-positive religion, wherein sex and sexuality are viewed as gifts from Allah (God); sexuality is thought to be the right of every person (Boellstorff, 2005). Marriage, then, is the social institution that organizes and controls sexuality. Further, within the Islamic faith anything that “violates the order of the world”—in this instance, marriage as an organizer of sexuality—is considered to be a source of evil and anarchy (Bouhdiba, 2001, p. 30). As a result of these tenets of the Muslim faith, heterosexual marriages and nuclear families are expected of devout Muslims (Boellstorff, 2005). Table 1.2 denotes the living arrangements of Muslim Americans today in the United States.

	Percentage All U.S. Muslims	Percentage Foreign Born
One-person household	23	22
Multiple-person household	75	75
Households with children	50	55
No children	46	43

Source: Pew Research Center (2017a).

It's very important to understand that Arab Americans differ widely in their religious beliefs and practices of religion (Arab American Institute, 2019). This is essential to know because cultural stereotypes of Muslim/Arab American women tend to lump religion (Muslim) and ethnicity (Arab) into one-and-the-same components of culture, portraying them as veiled Islamic traditionalists who are submissive, secluded in the home, and uneducated (Zahedi, 2007).

But, as sociology professor and researcher Jen'nan Ghazel Read of the University of California points out, understanding Muslim/Arab American culture is complicated (2003). On the one hand, as a group, Arab Americans are more highly educated and are more likely to earn \$100,000 or more per year than any other ethnic or racial group in the United States (Arab American Institute, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2017b). On the other hand, Arab religious and cultural customs and rituals reinforce traditional gender roles wherein women raise and nurture the children and men protect and provide for the family. As a result, many Arab Americans' marital and family experiences are strongly shaped by traditional Arab views of honor, modesty, and gender, as well as by the historical values of Islam (Arab American Institute, 2019; Davis & Davis, 1993). A good example of the complexities of Arab American culture is Ilhan Abdullahi Omar, a Somali-American politician who was elected to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives in 2019; she and Rashida Tlaib are the first two Muslim American women to

serve in Congress. Although in the United States it is commonplace for women to hold political office, only within the last decade have women in Arab countries made political inroads.

Without a doubt, there is great variation and diversity in our upbringing and our individual experiences with family and family living. It is virtually impossible in contemporary society to rely on the U.S. Census Bureau's rigid definition of *family* consisting of "two or more persons living together and related by blood, marriage, and adoption."

### Talking With Children About Diversity

Because we live in a world that is not free from bias and discrimination, as parents, guardians, and teachers we impart to our children that *everyone* has the right to feel included. It is important to teach children that hate hurts and leaves emotional scars that can affect not only a person's self-worth but also every aspect of a person's life. Because a child develops his or her self-concept and beliefs about others well before entering kindergarten, anti-bias and antidiscrimination education must begin early in the home and in school. Parents, guardians, and teachers need to model attitudes and behaviors that help young children appreciate and value the differences in others. To avoid prejudice and discrimination, we must

- Model the values, attitudes, and behaviors we want our children to develop. This requires being aware of our own conscious and unconscious stereotypes and behaviors.
- Expose children to people and experiences from other cultures and belief systems.
- Encourage children to see that relationships with people who are different from themselves can be rich and rewarding experiences.
- Talk with children about the similarities and differences between themselves and others. Help them to see that being "different" from someone does not mean the person is "worse" than someone else.
- Integrate diversity information and communication into conversations and activities.
- Teach children to be sensitive, critical thinkers, so that through examining and questioning they can better understand any issue.
- Adopt a "zero tolerance" policy about racism, prejudice, bias, and discrimination. Teach them that words *do hurt*.

Despite the fact that today's families are diverse in structure, income level, and racial and ethnic composition, and despite the fact that today's families experience family living in diverse ways, one particular theorist has been able to organize the different cultural contexts of family life so we can see the level of influence each context has on us. With this in mind, in the section that follows we'll take a look at Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model, a model noted for grouping the various contexts that surround us and influence our individual and family development.

## FAMILIES IN CULTURAL CONTEXTS

John Donne, in his *Meditation*, reminds us that who we are is influenced by factors outside of ourselves and beyond our control. He says, "*No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.*" Each of us has needs for sustenance, clothing, shelter, security, intimacy, and emotional support. Because of these needs, we find ourselves interacting with others in some capacity throughout our lives.

As we begin our study of marriage, family, and intimate relationships, it is necessary to understand and embrace the idea that we do not develop in isolation. Who we are as human beings—every emotion, fear, thought, and behavior—is somehow linked to the family in which we were raised, both genetically and environmentally. It is also important to understand that there are many areas of family life that are affected and influenced by the broader culture in which we live, by the many facets of

society that surround us. Often these influences are overlooked in the study of both individual development and the processes associated with family life.

### Social Identity: All for One and One for All?

How individuals understand and practice their intimate and family relationships is influenced by the culture in which they live. It is important to understand that family life experiences are determined in large part by how a culture defines its **social identity**, or whether societal goals emphasize the advancement of the group's interest or individual interests. Particularly important is whether the culture defines itself as a *collectivist* culture or an *individualistic* culture because culturally approved beliefs influence our expectations, experiences, attitudes, and behaviors (Neto, 2007). It profoundly affects the ways we behave and respond to the world.

#### Collectivist Cultures

In **collectivist cultures**, individuals define their identity in terms of the relationships they hold with others. For instance, if asked, "Who are you?" a collectivist is likely to respond by giving the family's name or the region from which he or she originates (Douglass & Umana-Taylor, 2015; Ferguson et al., 2017). The goals of the collective—the whole society—are given priority over individual needs, and group membership is important (Myers, 2008). In these cultures, members strive to be equal, contributing, beneficial members of the society, and their personal behavior is driven by a feeling of obligation and duty to the society (Douglass & Umana-Taylor, 2015; Ferguson et al., 2017; Triandis & Suh, 2002). Collectivist cultures promote the well-being and goals of the collective *group*, rather than the well-being and goals of the *individual*. Because of the desire to maintain harmony within the group, collectivist cultures stress harmony, cooperation, and promoting feelings of closeness (Kupperbusch et al., 1999).

Latin people, for example, value strong interdependent relationships with their families and they value the opinions of close friends (who, in many cases, are treated as family members); this, in turn, influences how they select mates and display and experience emotions, such as love and intimacy (Krys et al., 2022). Asians, too, accentuate the importance of the collective whole, and they therefore emphasize family bonds in their experiences of love, including extended family members (Feng et al., 2017). People's self-concepts, personal goals, mate selection, sexual attitudes, expectations of family members, family experiences, and the larger society are inseparable in collective societies (Johnson et al., 2005; Krys et al., 2022).



How couples and families experience their relationships is largely dependent on whether their culture adopts a *collectivist* or an *individualist* identity.

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## Individualistic Cultures

In **individualistic cultures**, individual goals are promoted over group goals, and people define their identity or sense of self in terms of personal attributes, such as wealth, social status, education level, and marital status (Myers, 2008). Unlike collectivists, individualists view themselves as truly independent entities from the society in which they live, and their personal needs and rights guide their behavior, rather than the needs of the society (Johnson et al., 2005). Individualistic cultures, such as those of the United States and some countries in western Europe, promote the idea of autonomy and individuation from the family; in turn, this autonomy promotes the practice of people selecting partners based on individual reasons (such as attraction, love, sex, money, security), rather than collective reasons (such as prearranged marriages in China and India) that might benefit the culture as a whole. Along these lines, when cultures promote the autonomy and independence of individuals (as seen in much of Western civilization), this autonomy, in turn, affects relationship satisfaction, the ease with which intimacy is established, and “love” as a basis for marriage (Dion & Dion, 1993; Hornsey et al., 2019). Relationship partners are free, by society’s standards, to choose a partner that best suits their needs; it is thought that this freedom of choice enhances relationship satisfaction and the experiences of love, intimacy, and sex (Hornsey et al., 2018).

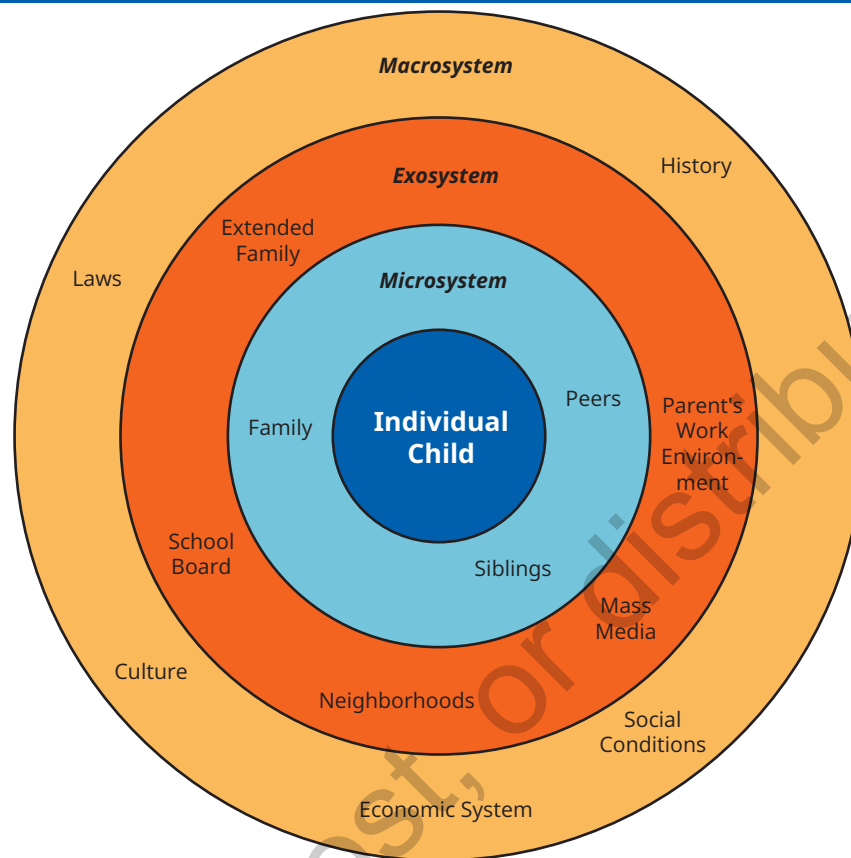
As you saw earlier in this chapter, a culture’s social identity shapes and directs the attitudes, norms, and behaviors of its members, such as how extended family members are important to Latin and Asian families—these behaviors are the result of how collectivist ideals shape families. But there are other cultural factors that significantly influence and shape intimate and family life experience. The **social ecology** perspective recognizes that individual family members’ experiences, along with outside social factors and policies, significantly affect the quality and the nature of their relationships (Alberets, 2002). In the section that follows, we examine the ways in which families are affected by the variety of contexts that surround them as we study the Ecological Model and the various contexts within that model: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem.

## The Ecological Model: Culturally Specific Influences That Affect Family Life

To understand the multiple areas of individual and family development, we turn our attention to the **Ecological Model** developed by Uri Bronfenbrenner (1979). Central to this model is the concept that people develop in a variety of interacting contexts. **Contexts** are the areas of individual and family development that play a role in the relationship between people and their environments. These multiple environments surround individuals from birth and play a significant interactive role in development. In order to truly understand individual relationship behaviors (such as communication) and the development of family life, we must first understand the interactive relationships between and among the different factors within the various contexts of development (Huitt, 2003). For example, if we want to study the effects of divorce on a child’s development, we can study the child separately, but we can also introduce or take away various factors within a certain context to better determine which has the greatest impact on a child’s development. Similarly, if we want to better understand a couple’s difficulty with sexual arousal and response, we can look at contextual factors, such as the stressors associated with employment, to see if they are exerting negative influences on the couple.

Figure 1.8 presents the Ecological Model. Notice that the person is located in the center of five concentric, nested circles that expand outward, similar to ripples on the surface of water. Each of those circles represents a different layer of societal interactions and influences external to the individual, which affects his or her development. The circles nearest the individual have more immediate impacts on us, and those farther out have less impact. Perhaps what makes this model so useful is that Bronfenbrenner recognized that the impact on relationships is *bi-directional*. Not only does the environment influence the individual, but the individual influences the environment. For example, a new baby in a family has an impact on the parents just as much as the parents have an impact on the baby. When a couple goes through a divorce, both spouses are affected, but their children and other extended family members and friends are also affected. And, even though the individual or the family may not directly interact with various levels of society (such as the different levels of government), as you will see later in our study this term, these social influences have an impact on family functioning and health.

FIGURE 1.8 ■ Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model



Source: National Institutes of Health. (n.d.). *Ecological model. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model describing the environmental influences on a child.* National Library of Medicine. [https://openi.nlm.nih.gov/detailedresult?img=PMC2676270\\_1471-2458-9-94-1&req=4](https://openi.nlm.nih.gov/detailedresult?img=PMC2676270_1471-2458-9-94-1&req=4)

As we examine each context in the model, it is important to bear in mind the positioning of the context to better understand the degree of influence on the individual. To help guide this process, we will discuss each context, or **ecosystem**, within the Ecological Model. Those contexts nearest the individual carry the greatest influence on her or his development.

### The Person

At the center of this model is the person. Bronfenbrenner recognized that a person's development is not simply a matter of biology, cognition, or social interaction. Development is, instead, an intricate intertwining of *all three* of these components. Individual influences include race, ethnicity, genetics, health, nutrition, and physiological abilities or disabilities. The contexts that surround us can affect, for example, our overall health.

### The Microsystem

The **microsystem** is the developmental context nearest the individual and represents those interactions in which people are directly involved. The elements that make up this ecosystem are the individuals, groups, and agencies that have the earliest and most immediate influences on the individual, such as the following:

- *The family of origin.* The family in which we are raised is the most influential on our development. The family structure (single-parent or two-parent family), socioeconomic status (wealthy, middle class, or low income), race and ethnicity (strong influences on family educational and income levels), parenting styles (Are the parents warm and supportive? Do they abuse or use substances?), and parental involvement all play important roles in who children become (Clark-Jones, 2018).

- *Daycare/schools.* Because children spend an average seven hours a day in daycare or in a classroom, Bronfenbrenner believed them to be a key influence on development. For example, the location of the school is important; students in small or rural communities or small suburbs tend to score higher on standardized tests than children from larger schools (Amirah Khairul Amali et al., 2023).
- *The community.* Many of us have heard the saying, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Neighbors, neighborhoods, peer groups, and workplaces make up a community. The greater the community’s involvement in the child’s life, the greater the child’s success and achievement throughout life (Minh et al., 2017). Community involvement may include literacy programs, nutritional programs, recreational opportunities, or teen mentoring programs.
- *The church, synagogue, or mosque.* Religious institutions influence the development of a person’s character and ethical and moral development (Abo-Zena & Rana, 2020).

We individuals also have an impact on our environment: As we comply or rebel, agree or disagree, or express our views, hopes, and ambitions, we exert influence on the elements with which we interact.



The microsystem is the developmental context nearest the individual, and its components exert the most influence on a person’s development, such as the influence of a child’s school and teachers.

FatCamera/Getty Images

### The Mesosystem

In the **mesosystem**, Bronfenbrenner retains all of the elements that are present in the microsystem but now focuses on the interaction *between* the various elements rather than on the individual. For instance, how does the school affect the family? How does the church or temple affect the family? In what ways does the school impact the neighborhood? Consider a school district that tries to establish a sex education program that offers free condom distribution and referrals to health clinics for abortion in a community that has a strong fundamental religious belief system. Is it likely that a conservative community would endorse these practices? Likewise, consider the influence of a neighborhood organization that creates an after-school athletic and academic program for children located in a neighborhood that has a large gang presence or a neighborhood watch organization that creates a network of “safe” houses that children can run to if a stranger attempts to approach them on the way home from school. These scenarios illustrate how elements within the microsystem interact with each other rather than directly with an individual and his or her family.

### The Exosystem

The **exosystem** consists of the fabrics of society in which policies are made and influenced that ultimately have an impact on the elements of the microsystem and the individual (Newman & Newman, 2020). Social policies are beneficial to families when they foster and support the major functions of a family, such as childrearing, economic support, and caring for family members (Alberts, 2002). As Figure 1.8 shows us, the exosystem serves as an umbrella for all of the “systems” in a society.

Consider the state board of education, which establishes policies and selects curricula that are used in each of the local school districts. At the same time, the hierarchies of various religious denominations determine the central tenets of their faith, which include and determine what behaviors are deemed to be appropriate or inappropriate according to those tenets. In turn, those religious beliefs, in large part, determine what is taught in the public schools. As a result of this influence, a public school education may be vastly different in one state compared to another, depending on the components of the exosystem. In Kansas public schools, for example, teachers are permitted to teach the tenets of evolution, but they are also required to teach “creation by intelligent design.” The theory of intelligent design maintains that the universe is best explained by creation by an intelligent cause, rather than by evolution of species. Further, in 2016, battles raged in the Kansas legislature over a bill under consideration in the House that would prevent school boards from using the national sexual education curriculum to give more control to local educators. Also up for debate was whether Kansas schools should continue to provide sex education in public schools. These issues remain undecided. The broader point here is that because Kansas is in the center of the “Bible belt” in the United States, many curricula decisions are centered on the religious hierarchy of the state.

The media are another element within the exosystem. Some news outlets are thought to have either liberal or conservative bias in the way that they report information, consequently influencing how certain policies and perspectives are viewed. In movies and through television programming, we also see changes in how families and family life are portrayed. Whether these changes are simply representations of historical changes in families over time or are attempts to change perceptions about what family life should be is not always clear. How these movies and TV shows are perceived may depend, to some extent, on a person’s life experiences and the influences that have shaped their development to this point.

### The Macrosystem

The **macrosystem** represents the next layer in Bronfenbrenner’s model. It recognizes that a society has a set of overarching cultural values and beliefs that affects individual development by establishing either implicit or explicit rules about what is or is not acceptable behavior. In a population as diverse as that of the United States, there are hundreds of different religious, racial, and ethnic groups. Each may have specific cultural norms that do not conform to a broader set of values. Additionally, not all groups that fall within a general ethnic category will be the same. For instance, not all Hispanics share the same belief system. Mexican Americans may have cultural values and expectations different from those of Cuban Americans. Jews have different values than do Muslims or Buddhists. And liberals have different values than do conservatives. The cultural values of parents who are first-generation immigrants to the United States may be vastly different from those of their children who have been acculturated in American values through their interactions with peers at school and the media.

### The Chronosystem

The **chronosystem**, the next, and outermost layer, reflects changes that happen over time. It accounts for the collective historical precursors of current social debates over, for example, social and economic discrimination, women’s rights to reproductive choice, and the long-held definition of marriage, such as who can marry whom (Dutton, 1998).

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) framework allows us to both grasp the nature of the main interacting influences on our lives and to examine the role that each plays. With the Ecological Model we can explore and better understand marriage, intimate relationships, and family life in various contexts. Throughout our study together, we’ll explore certain areas of Bronfenbrenner’s model, such as the economic, religious, and government contexts, and how they shape and affect the experiences of intimate partners and families today.

Up to this point, our study has highlighted the fact that the United States is a blend of races, ethnicities, and religions from all over the world. Often, though, we tend to focus on our own families, failing to realize the vastness of the human race. Many of us fall into the trap of thinking that how *we* experience family and intimate relationships is the *only* way to experience these aspects of life. After all, we are each experts in our individual understandings. In order to gain a truer insight into the workings of family, intimate relations, and marriage, we must step back from our cultural norms and stereotypes and enlarge our scope, so that we may see and take in more—and so far, our study has given us this opportunity.

But this wonderful medley of race, ethnicity, culture, and ways of life is not embraced by all. With this in mind, Dorian Solot and Marshall Miller (2004), founders and directors of the Alternatives to Marriage Project, put forth the following affirmation of family diversity:

We believe that all families should be valued, that the well-being of children is critical to our nation's future, and that people who care for one another should be supported in their efforts to build happy, healthy relationships. One of America's strengths is its diversity, which includes not only a wide range of races, ethnicities, creeds, abilities, genders, and sexual orientations, but also a range of family forms.

Now that you have a knowledge base in the forms and functions of marriages and families, before we conclude this chapter let's take a brief look at one of the central ways in which we'll explore family life throughout our course of study: the family life education perspective.

## FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION: THE STUDY OF FAMILIES THROUGH A FAMILY LENS

The central concept of this book is to examine family and intimate relations using a family life education approach as a central theme. Borrowing and adapting theoretical frameworks from the fields of sociology and psychology, the **family life education** perspective unveils the inadequacies families feel when they are faced with change and then provides organized, programmatic education to help strengthen families. Some approaches (such as family therapy) first look to intervention instead of education; however, this text's approach acknowledges that intervention often comes too late to be effective in fully developing the potential of individuals and families. Family life education is a tool used to explore family and intimate relationships, but it is not a "theory." Instead, it is a lens through which we can study and understand family and couple relationships.

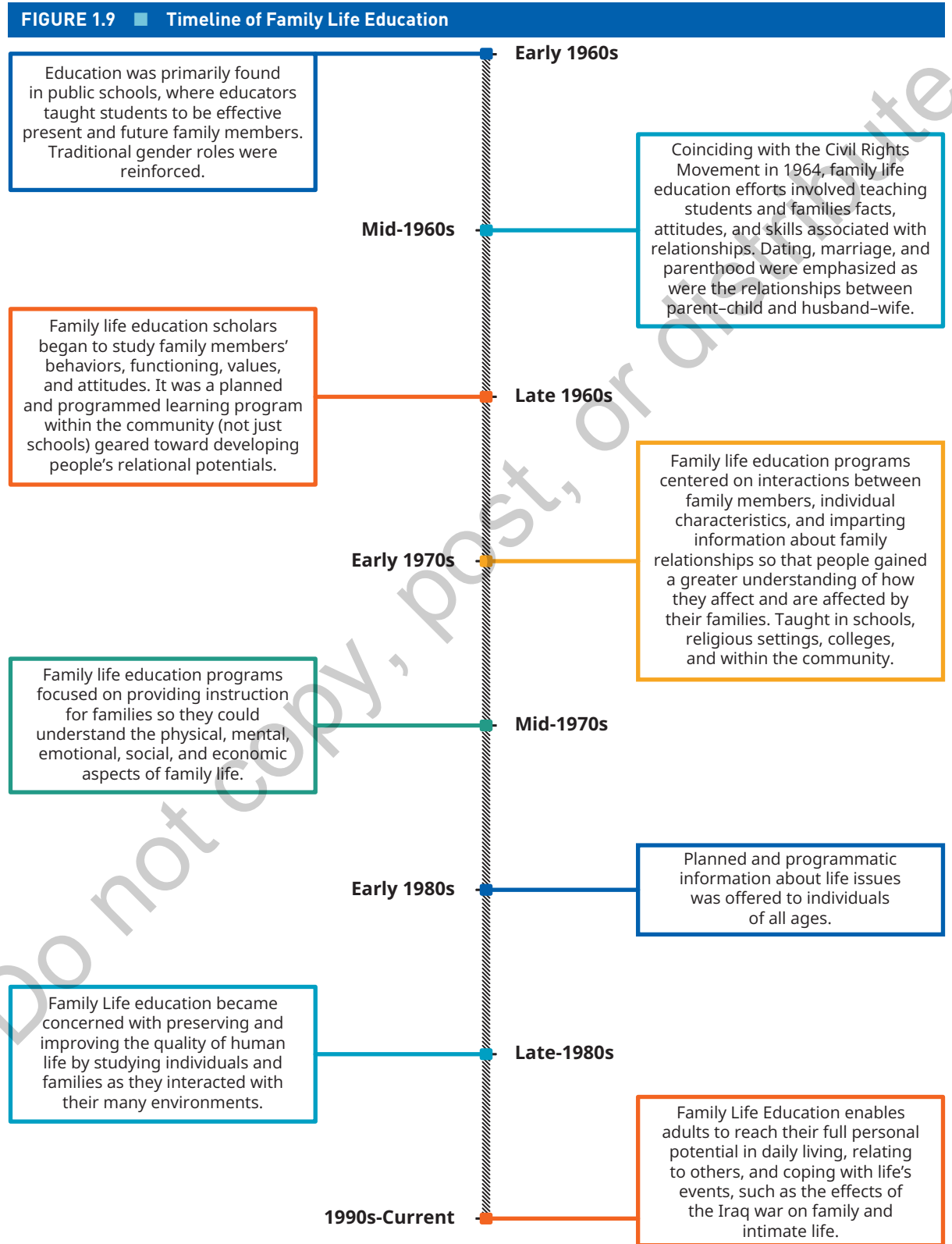
### Understanding Families' Needs and Developing their Potentials

As early as the 1960s, when U.S. culture experienced much social upheaval, people who had concerns for the "staggering list of social ills" that had an impact on family life began to conceive and organize education for family living (Smith, 1968). With young adults' newfound emphasis on sex, drugs, and rock and roll, the country was ripe for a family education concept. These early efforts to educate families centered on a **dealing-with-problems focus** (Arcus et al., 1993). Society was rapidly changing. The Vietnam War provoked cries from young adults against the "establishment"—those who promoted long-held, established societal beliefs and norms about marriage, sexuality, gender roles, childbearing, childrearing, and politics.

A concept that went hand in hand with the dealing-with-problems focus to educate families was the **preventing-the-problems focus**. Family life education professor and parent educator Richard Kerckhoff (1964) maintained that families faced with radical societal changes only needed to be shown how to do the correct things. According to Kerckhoff, if families could somehow be pointed in the right direction, then "the divorce rate would drop, children would be reared properly, and the institution of family would be save" (p. 898). Problem prevention remains a prevalent theme in family life education today. As renowned family life educator and professor of human sciences Carol Darling (1987, p. 816) noted, efforts to educate families in family living is "the foremost preventive measure for the avoidance of family problems." The **developing-family-potentials focus** also arose out of the societal turmoil of the 1960s. Promoting goals ranging from building on family strengths to developing

healthy, fulfilling, and responsible interpersonal relationships, family life education efforts were—and still are today—intended to build on positive aspects of family life and bring about human capabilities that improve and enhance personal life and family living (Arcus et al., 1993).

The definitions of family life education have changed and progressed over time, as the timeline in Figure 1.9 shows us. But what has remained consistent over the decades is that the family life education



Source: *Handbook of Family Life Education* by Margaret E. Arcus. Copyright 1993 by Sage Publications Inc Books.

perspective takes into consideration individual development and life course experiences and how our interpersonal relationship skills and interaction patterns are shaped in the context of family living. To understand sexuality in the context of relationships, for example, we first must have an understanding of our sexual development. Similarly, in order to understand why we love the people we do, we first have to acquire an understanding of how those capacities develop and are maintained in the context of family living. So, as we work our way through our course of study, we will focus on our development into relational people as we examine areas of family living and family development. Finally, the family life education perspective also provides a coherent system of family-oriented services and government policies that strengthen families and family living (Arcus et al., 1993; Weiss, 1990).

## TAKING SIDES

### Is the Family of Origin Really That Important?

As couples prepare to enter into a serious relationship or into marriage, it is important that they are able to negotiate every kind of issue. But their past experiences in their families of origin greatly influence how they deal with things that crop up in their relational life. Given the importance of the family of origin, is it important that couples share similar family experiences in their background?

**ONE SIDE:** I come from a family that has faced a lot of issues. My mom and dad were divorced when I was about 10, and my dad is now on his third marriage (and who knows how long that one will last?). My entire childhood was filled with nothing but my mom and dad arguing—even after they got divorced. Even though my dad is in my life (I mean, I see him regularly), it's not like he's ever lived up to anything he's ever promised . . . he didn't even come to my high school graduation. So I don't know. I love my fiancé, but our experiences are just so different, especially with my parents and their marriage. I only know certain ways to act, certain ways to handle conflict (I tend to clam up and not say anything, whereas my fiancé wants to talk it all out). My mom is remarried now, but it's like she can't fully trust him because in the back of her mind she thinks he'll leave her like my dad did. So when you talk about family of origin, I have to question whether it's wise to marry someone with vastly different experiences from mine.

**THE OTHER SIDE:** I've given our differences a lot of thought. On my first trip home to meet my fiancé's family, I noticed right away that the family is pretty different from mine. Like, in my family it's a pretty happy, laid back house most of the time, whereas in my fiancé's family it's like there's just this thick tension that's always just below the surface—and you just don't know when someone's going to blow up or get [ticked] off at someone else. And, they do seem to fight and argue quite a bit . . . a lot of times over nothing really, but they just fight to fight. But having said that, I have to admit that [my fiancé] *is* different from the family roots. I think my fiancé sees that all families aren't fighters and yellers, and that just because that's the way life was lived doesn't mean it has to be *repeated* in our marriage. I think being aware of the differences in our families is what is most important—being aware of the differences and vowing not to fall into those destructive behaviors.

**YOUR SIDE:** Take into consideration what you have learned in this chapter, along with your personal life experiences.

1. Do you believe couples who have opposing families of origin should marry? Why, or why not?
2. What potential difficulties do you foresee in this couple's marital future? In what ways can their discrepant backgrounds strengthen their marital relationship?
3. Before you read the information about the influences the family of origin exerts in our future relationships, had you given much thought to this area of family living? Why, or why not? Is similar family background an important mate selection factor for you?

## Practicing Family Life Education

Today, an increasing number of professionals are family life educators because family studies is multidisciplinary. For example, psychologists, sociologists, and social workers may also simultaneously practice as family life educators. A **Certified Family Life Educator (CFLE)** is someone who has demonstrated knowledge (gained through work experience and college coursework) in the content areas displayed in Table 1.3. As you can see, the family life education perspective addresses every area of couple, intimate, marital, and family living, including diversity and family policy. Family life education is

**TABLE 1.3 ■ Key Content Areas in Family Life Education**

- **Families in Society** includes varying family forms; cross-cultural and diverse families and family values; and social and cultural variations (ethnicity, race, religion).
- **Family Dynamics** focuses on family communication patterns, conflict resolution, coping strategies, families in crisis/stress and distress and families with special needs (military, step-foster, adoptive families, etc.).
- **Human Growth and Development** explores human development across our lifespan.
- **Human Sexuality** presents sexual anatomy and physiology, reproduction, the emotional aspects of sexuality, sexual response and dysfunction, and our sexual values.
- **Interpersonal Relationships** focuses on love, human intimacy, and relational skills, such as communication.
- **Family Resource Management** focuses on family financial goals and planning and money decisions.
- **Parent Education** looks at the choice and challenges of parenthood, including the rights and responsibilities of parents, parental roles, and variations in parenting practices and styles.
- **Family Law and Public Policy** focuses on laws relating to marriage, divorce, cohabitation, child custody, child protection and the rights of children, and public policy (civil rights, social security) as it affects the family.
- **Ethics** concerns the diversity of human values and the complexity of how values are shaped in contemporary society.

Source: *Handbook Of Family Life Education* by S.R. Czaplewski and S.R. Jorgensen, Copyright 1993 by SAGE.

also multiprofessional in its scope—pastors, rabbis, priests, health professionals, social workers, mental health professionals, and researchers may be family life educators.

Today, the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) sponsors the only international program that certifies family life educators; such certification recognizes a professional's proven background, understanding, and knowledge of the content areas. And although a CFLE may concentrate his or her expertise in one discipline, such as sexuality education, competencies in the multiple areas reflect the understanding that today's families face a wide range of issues that affect their ability to "do" family well. Thus, the awareness of and knowledge in the content areas also enables CFLEs to be more effective in their educational work with individuals and families (NCFR, 2019).

Now, armed with an understanding of the many aspects of family life education, as well as the diversity in families today, it's time to roll up our sleeves and begin our exploration of contemporary family life. The next step is to help you gain an appreciation of how you affect and are affected by the intimate relationships in your life. Although each of us accomplishes many milestones in our individual lifespan development, we do so within the context of family living. Every phase of our individual development across our human life cycle intersects with the development of the family throughout its developmental cycle, ultimately shaping who we are as relational people. In the next chapter, we'll examine how people's family of origin shapes their individual development and, in turn, shapes their capacity to love and to be loved later in life.

### FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION: STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

All of the diversity seen today in the United States contributes to a unique, distinct social fabric that adds a deep richness to our culture. But along with diversity comes substantial differences in family structure, family living, and family experiences. Although the "traditional" family has long been held as the "ideal" standard in childrearing and family life, we are no longer a society composed primarily of married couples raising their biological or adopted children. Today, there really is no such thing as a homogenized American family composed of a breadwinning male who provides for all of the family's needs and a bread-making female who tends to the family's needs. While some family practitioners maintain that the changes we see in family structures today are a negative experience, others argue that the changes simply reflect more acceptance of diversity in our culture. You may also have a strong feeling or opinion about the changes seen in today's families; throughout our course of study together,



you will gain not only a deeper understanding of family life today but also a deeper appreciation for these differences.

As diverse and distinct as U.S. families are today, though, they are all a part of the whole. We do not develop in isolation! Just as important, we do not experience family living and family life separately from our surrounding environments—and we do not experience family life in isolation from other families, no matter how different they may be from our own.

Because “family” and intimate relationships transcend race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and sexual identity, you will see yourself somewhere among the pages of this book. *Together*—you the student, your classmates, I the author/teacher, and your professor/instructor—using this text as our guide, we will examine and understand the complexities and intricacies of family life. I hope that this book will help you gain a solid, practical understanding of family and intimate relationships and equip you and empower you with the education to help you develop your full potential in your professional, personal, and family life. In this pursuit, I hope to engage your entire essence—your intellect, your emotions, and your heart.

## SUMMARY

### What Is Marriage?

- There are differing cultural, religious, legal, and social aspects of marriage worldwide. To some, marriage is a social union; to others, it is a religious act and a strong social bond around which the rest of society is organized.
- Marriage is an important social structure that serves society on political, religious, social, and economic levels.
- Marriages across the world are typically classified as either monogamous or polygamous. Monogamy is the legal structure of marriage recognized in the United States and in other Western civilizations. Polygamy is the more widely practiced form of marriage across the world.

### What Is Family?

- The concept of family is a subjective experience, and “real-world” definitions are infinitely varied. Your family of origin (or family of orientation) is the family into which you were born or brought into by adoption and where you learn cultural norms. The family of procreation is the family unit that is formed when you marry and produce children. Sociocultural, economic, and political changes in the United States have influenced the family form and family life, giving way to a more complex and diverse definition of family.
- To help families reach their full potential, those who study family life education attempt to understand the changing compositions of contemporary families by using statistics to help them identify current patterns and trends. Students of family life understand that the new family landscape includes a wide array of family forms: nuclear, extended, single-parent, childless/childfree, stepfamily, cohabiting family, gay/lesbian families, and immigrant families.

### Contemporary Families

- Students of family life understand that contemporary families are racially, ethnically, religiously, economically, and sexually diverse. They study the everchanging composition of U.S. families to further their understanding of the complex, changing nature of family health and family living.

### Families in Cultural Contexts

- No human being develops in isolation—every emotion, every fear, every thought, and every behavior is linked to the family in which we were raised, either by genetics or by the family environment. In addition, many areas of family life are influenced by the economic, religious, and political systems that make up the broader culture in which we live.

- Family experiences are largely shaped by the culture's social identity—whether it adopts a collectivist or individualist identity. Collectivists work together for the good of the group, while individualists do what they believe to be in their best personal interests.
- In his Ecological Model, Uri Bronfenbrenner theorized that people develop within development contexts, with the individual at the center of five ecosystems, or outside influences on the individual or family. The individual is influenced by the environment and also influences the environment.
  - *Microsystem*: This is the developmental context nearest to the individual and includes environments to which people are directly exposed, such as the family of origin, schools, the community, and religious affiliation.
  - *Mesosystem*: This describes the interaction between the various elements (e.g., How does the school have impact on the family? How does the religious institution?).
  - *Exosystem*: This is the context in which policies are made and influenced that ultimately have an impact on the elements of the microsystem and the individual. This context of development can be seen as an umbrella for all of the systems in a society (educational, religious, economic, etc.).
  - *Macrosystem*: The recognition that a society has a set of overarching cultural values and beliefs that also affects development by giving its members either implicit or explicit rules about what is or is not acceptable behavior.
  - *Chronosystem*: This system reflects the changes that happen over time.

#### Family Life Education: The Study of Families Through a Family Lens

- Borrowing and adapting theoretical frameworks from the fields of sociology, psychology, and other theories, the family life education perspective unveils the inadequacies families feel when they are faced with change and then provides organized programmatic education to help strengthen families. These theories, as well as statistics, help us understand and recognize family trends and experiences, but a student of couple relationships, marriage, and family life should look beyond the numbers to see what they are really telling us.
- Family life education is multidisciplinary and multiprofessional in its scope, examining theories and frameworks that are foundational to the understanding of human behavior and couple/family relationship patterns. Family life education is a lens through which we can study family processes.

#### KEY TERMS

Cenogamy	Ecosystem
Certified Family Life Educator (CFLE)	Exosystem
Childfree	Extended family
Childless	Family
Chosen family	Family life education
Chronosystem	Family of origin
Civil union	Family of procreation
Cohabiting	Family values
Collectivist cultures	Fictive kin
Contexts	General fertility rate
Dealing-with-problems focus	Household
Developing-family-potentials focus	Immigrants
Diverse	Individualistic cultures
Diversity	Latin
Ecological Model	Macrosystem

Mesosystem  
Microsystem  
Monogamism  
Monogamy  
Native American/Alaska Native  
Nonfamily household  
Nuclear family  
Polyandry

Polygamy  
Polygyny  
Preventing-the-problems focus  
Single-parent family  
Social ecology  
Social identity  
Social union  
Stepfamily

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## 2

## UNDERSTANDING FAMILIES THROUGH RESEARCH AND THEORY

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 2.1 Explain the research method from start to finish.
- 2.2 Assess the essential components of empirical research.
- 2.3 Describe several family theories that enhance our understanding of family processes and promote the development of effective family programs.
- 2.4 Defend the idea that we do not develop in isolation using the concepts of the human life cycle and the family life cycle.

Consider the experiences of this 21-year-old college student:

Like many newlyweds, I couldn't wait to set up our first home. Everything was perfectly planned. Our five-year goals were in place: He would join the Army, I would finish my degree, he would finish his four-year stint in the service, finish his degree, and we would then begin to start our family. Because of his service in the military, our student loans would be minimal, and we would be in a position to buy our first home. It was a perfect plan.

I have been married for nine months, and nothing has gone like we thought it would. Two weeks before our wedding, my husband was called up to serve in the war in Iraq. Our wedding went off without a hitch, but we had to cut our honeymoon short because of his deployment to the war. We were transferred to a military base in the Midwest! I didn't know anyone, I had no family, no friends. I felt like I was dropped off alongside the highway and expected to make the best of it. But we survived his first tour of duty. I thought to myself, "Finally, we can start our marriage." We both felt that if we could survive the separation so early in our marriage, we could survive anything. He was home for about three months and everything changed again—he was deployed again to Iraq.

To be honest, I'm scared. I'm scared every day that he won't come back to me, that something will happen to him. I feel so cheated—I didn't bargain for this! I have to wonder, what will happen to our marriage? Can we make it through these separations? How many more separations will there be over the next three years? How do couples get through this?

Science is humankind's exploration of how the world works. Religion, philosophy, art, mythology, and literature have also historically attempted to quench the insatiable thirst of human inquiry, but science is distinguished from these other modes of exploration—and explanation—by the methods used to discover and to know (Babbie, 2016; Kidder, 1981; Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991). The exploration to discover and understand often begins with a simple inquiry, such as the question posed by the newlywed: How are marriages and families affected when a loved one serves his or her country overseas for extended periods of time? Will their marriage survive? When examining social and individual processes by engaging in and using methods beyond logic, common sense, intuition, or reason alone, we engage in scientific inquiry—in the practice of social science research.

## UNDERSTANDING FAMILIES THROUGH RESEARCH

Many students feel alienated from and intimidated by the research process. They have a hard time understanding how facts and figures help us understand the "big picture." This alienation, in fact, has been an obstacle for many would-be social science practitioners over the years. A colleague of mine, for example, told me that for as long as she could remember, she had wanted to be a psychologist. She majored in psychology as an undergraduate—that is, until it was time to begin coursework in research methods and statistics. Because she had a fear of and an aversion to statistics, her advisor suggested that she change her major to English. I must confess I had a similar fear of the research process. I remember

thinking, “But I’m not a statistician—that’s why I’m studying the family, not numbers!” As it happened, I was luckier than my colleague. Because of a dynamic research methods professor who was able to show the relevance and importance of theories and research, I was able to replace my fear with excitement about the research process. And it was while I was taking that course that the research bug bit me.

The research process is an integral and critical part of your study of marriage and family. Research is important because it enables social scientists, family practitioners, psychologists, and sociologists to develop family theories and family education programs, create family policies that strengthen and serve today’s families, and better understand societal trends, such as the demographic trends of contemporary families, as you saw earlier. Indeed, research is neither boring nor insignificant because it has an impact on the daily lives of today’s couples and families. It is through research and these theories that we come to a deeper understanding of family functioning and family process.



The research method allows family scientists to explore intimate couple and family relationships. The results of the research enable family practitioners to create programs that enhance couples’ relationships and family living.

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### Social Science Research

The term **research** means to study thoroughly using the process of scholarly or scientific inquiry. **Social science research** is the scholarly discipline used to examine human society and relationships. When conducting research in the social sciences, researchers examine behaviors, emotions, and relationships—all of which cannot be easily quantified or examined within neat, tidy categories. I like to refer to social science research as “the other side of the microscope”—in other words, social scientists are not concerned with what the results are under the microscope as are biologists; instead, they are concerned with factors that cannot be seen microscopically; they are concerned with *people*. The *whole person*.

Researching couple relationships and family life allows us to explore intimate relationships within the context of partnerships, marriage, and family. Family research provides information that enables family practitioners—such as family life educators, social workers, teachers, members of the clergy, therapists, and psychologists—to develop, implement, and evaluate programs that may enhance family life and family growth. Understanding the problems that face today’s family and finding explanations and answers to those problems would not be possible without the practice of social science inquiry through research.

As 19th-century American humorist Artemus Ward once noted, “It ain’t the things we don’t know that gets us in trouble. It’s the things we know that ain’t so” (Kidder, 1981). This tongue-in-cheek

statement has an element of truth. We often believe we “know” something to be true or factual because it seems to be the logical, commonsense conclusion. Take, for example, the following statements:

- Children reared by same-sex parents experience negative outcomes.
- A couple who cohabits before marriage increases their chances that their marriage will last because they will work out all of their difficulties before going down the aisle.
- Married couples who frequently argue have lower levels of marital satisfaction than couples who experience few conflicts.

What is your logical, commonsense response to these statements?

Relying on logic or common sense frequently “limits us to the familiar” (Kidder, 1981, p. 4). If you agree or disagree with the previous statements, you are using your intuition or existing beliefs, your life experiences, and your expectations to draw those conclusions. You are reasoning about what might be a plausible or the most likely outcome and drawing your conclusions based on your interpretation of circumstances. Are your conclusions accurate?

The problem with using our common sense and logic is that everyone sees things differently based on different value systems, political beliefs, religious beliefs—the very values and beliefs that provide the lens through which we view our social environments. Because of our differences in values and beliefs, how can we “know” that, for example, children reared by same-sex couples really do (or really do not) experience negative developmental outcomes? What aspects of our belief system would lead us to believe that couples who live together before marriage have a higher (or lower) success rate than couples who do not? How can we “know” how marital separation, such as in the opening vignette, impacts marital happiness or satisfaction? We “know” when we conduct research that supports or does not support our suppositions. We look at the numbers, we draw conclusions, and we apply theories, all of which gives us insight and helps us know and understand the truth.

### The Research Method: Start to Finish

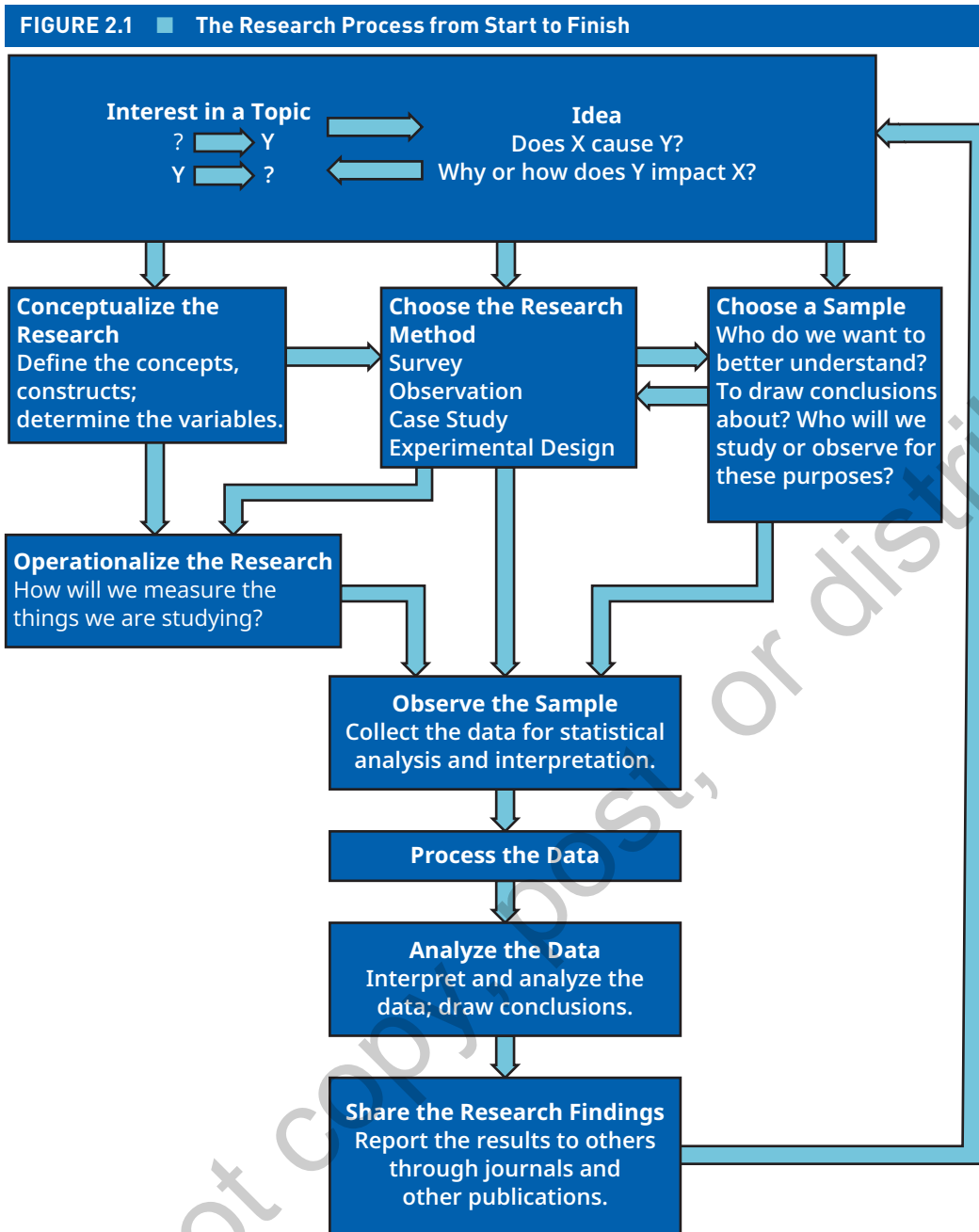
In his 1911 work, *The Grammar of Science*, statistician Karl Pearson maintained, “There is no shortcut to truth, no way to gain a knowledge of the universe except through the gateway of scientific method” (p. 17). The **scientific method** is a process by which social science researchers formulate questions concerning social and individual phenomena and seek out answers. Using the scientific method, researchers design a process from start to finish that details the sequential, interrelated investigative steps the researcher will follow. Much like building a house, a solid investigative design plan moves researchers systematically through each step as they look for answers to their initial questions.

#### From Start to Finish

If you have a well-conceived research design and a sound, logical plan, your plan is more likely to yield valuable results. Figure 2.1 illustrates the starting point of a research design, either through interest in a topic, an idea, or a desire to explore a theory. This design can be used for both quantitative research and qualitative research. **Quantitative research** uses statistical methods to count and measure outcomes from a study; it is a systematic attempt to define, measure, and report on the relationships between elements that are being studied. **Qualitative research** involves detailed verbal or written descriptions of characteristics under investigation; this research typically involves observation and interviews to collect data. To aid in your understanding of the research process, we’ll follow a research design plan that examined marital satisfaction among deployed members of the U.S. Army (Schumm et al., 2000).

**Step 1. Choosing the Research Topic.** Intimacy, jealousy, the effects of divorce on children, sexuality, gender identity and gender roles, family communication and conflict—the number of potential research topics is virtually limitless, and investigators choose to examine topics for a variety of reasons. Some may select a research topic because of a concern with a social issue or problem, such as the effects of peacetime and war deployment on military families, as illustrated in the opening vignette; some





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may have a great interest in a particular area of behavior; others may choose to examine the validity of a certain theory; still others may select a topic because of financial or professional incentives to do so (Kidder, 1981).

Once a research topic is chosen, the investigator needs to determine which variables to study. A **variable** is a characteristic that is measured in a study. It is called a variable because the value or degree of the characteristic *varies* among the people or group of people being studied.

In the military study, for example, the examiners wanted to assess changes in marital satisfaction over time among soldiers who were on a peacekeeping mission overseas. They wanted to better understand whether long-term separation reduced marital satisfaction and to see whether satisfaction became elevated once the soldiers returned home (Schumm et al., 2000). The variables for this investigation included soldiers' assessments of their marital satisfaction pre-deployment, mid-deployment,

and post-deployment. Another variable was marital stability, or how stable the soldiers' marriages were before, during, and after deployment.

**Step 2. Creating the Research Question.** At the core of any valid research is the **research question**, or the research hypothesis. Before researchers pose a research question or hypothesis, they must first have a clear understanding of the problem and a clear vision of their objective. In the military study, the research question was What impact do long overseas deployments have on the families of soldiers? Because initial research hypotheses may involve many unknowns at the outset, researchers often need to refine their investigation by doing an exhaustive search of the existing research studies related to their topic of inquiry. This is referred to as a **literature review**. This process allows researchers to get a better grasp on the scope of the problem and all aspects related to the research topic.

After the researcher has a solid understanding of the problem he or she wants to investigate, a research hypothesis is formed. A **hypothesis** is a speculative statement about a variable or the relationship between variables in a study. In a sense, hypotheses are predictions about the variables that will be measured in the study (Agresti & Finlay, 2008). In the sequential research process, statistical **hypotheses testing** takes place at a later point in the investigation. A hypothesis is never accepted or confirmed; based on the evidence gathered, a researcher can either *reject* a hypothesis or *fail to reject* a hypothesis.

**Step 3. Conceptualizing the Research.** Once a researcher has generated an idea or interest in a topic area, has formulated a research question, and has selected the variables to be studied, the next step in planning the design of the research study is conceptualization. **Conceptualization** is the process by which the researcher specifically denotes or indicates all of the concepts—or constructs—under investigation. A concept, or **construct**, refers to intangibles. For example, if I asked you to define marital satisfaction, we would soon discover that definitions for these terms are as numerous as the number of students reading this textbook. As research methodologists Elazur Pedhazur and Liora Schmelkin put it, “Even for people who speak the same language, words have different meanings, depending on, among other things, who speaks, to whom, in what context, at what time, and with what purpose. Words . . . are loaded with connotations” (1991, p. 164). Thus, a construct is a “mental creation” (Babbie, 2016) that enables individuals to communicate in concrete terms about abstract ideas that have no single, unwavering meaning—such as “love.” If we pause just a moment to think about Earl Babbie’s description of a construct, then we quickly come to the conclusion that just about everything examined in the social sciences is a construct!

**Step 4. Using Operational/Empirical Definitions.** Because constructs are mental creations and words may have different connotations, it is important that researchers come to a workable definition for the constructs under investigation. For example, how can I be sure that when you are reading my research you, in your mental creation, are referring to “marital satisfaction” in the same capacity that I am? In the past, marital satisfaction has been operationally defined by some researchers as a set of desirable characteristics of the ideal marriage, such as maintaining feelings of mutual love and respect, equitable sharing of duties and responsibilities, making decisions together, mutual sharing of interests, and mutual agreement on important issues (Fowers & Olson, 1993). Other researchers define marital satisfaction by using global evaluations of a couple’s behaviors and feelings, such as the amount of conflict between the couple or whether the individuals would marry their spouses again if they had it to do over (Kamp et al., 2008; Karney & Bradbury, 2020). So you see, the definition of a construct can change depending on who the researcher is and the purpose of the study.

To avoid confusion, *at the outset of the research*, researchers create **operational definitions** that describe or characterize the constructs (concepts) that are being studied. As the research progresses, the empirical (scientific) definitions may need to be refined. Whether a consumer of the research agrees with empirically defined terms is not important.

**Step 5. Choosing the Research Method.** The next step in the research process involves selecting which research method (or combination of research methods) to use when pursuing the investigation. In order to represent in a statistical format human behaviors and patterns of behavior, empirical

data must be gathered. The best method for studying couples, the family, marriage, and other interpersonal relationships largely depends on the purpose of the research—whether it is exploration, description, or explanation. To study families, family scientists typically use four primary research methods to collect data: the survey, observational research, the case study, and experimental design.

**Surveys.** For three decades, influential social and economics science researcher Don Dillman has helped social scientists effectively plan and conduct survey research with his landmark book, *Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method* (1978). The **survey** research method, a structured questionnaire, is the most popular technique for gathering data when studying families and interpersonal relationships (Dillman, 1999). Standardized questionnaires are an excellent method for determining trends and behavioral patterns and for gathering original data about a certain population. By collecting survey responses from a group of people, a **sample**, researchers can sometimes infer conclusions based on survey data and extend them to the larger population.

We will discuss methods of sampling later in this chapter. For now, understand that in order for a questionnaire or survey to yield valuable information that reflects the characteristics of the population being studied, it must be well constructed and well designed. According to Don Dillman (1999), a well-constructed survey is unbiased and easily understood by study respondents. The questions in a good survey should also be carefully worded and nonobjectionable.

There are many different types of surveys and questionnaires. Some are mailed or e-mailed to potential respondents, some are Web based, and others are carried out by telephone or face-to-face interviews. Whatever the method, each has its strengths and weaknesses. And the success of any survey research is measured by the response rate of the study subjects.

**Response rate.** The **response rate** is the percentage of the study subjects who respond to the survey. Perhaps one of the most questionable response rates was obtained by Shere Hite, author of the well-known human sexuality study, *The Hite Report* (Hite, 1976). Hite indicated she sent out 100,000 sexuality questionnaires to women, but only about 4,500 women responded to the survey, or a 4.5 percent response rate. This low response rate was a red flag for social scientists. Because the response rate to a survey or questionnaire indicates how representative the study sample is (to what extent it accurately reflects the characteristics) of the larger population, very low response rates such as Hite's show that those who did not respond to the survey differed from those who did respond. How high a response rate is high enough? Universally, a response rate of 50 percent is considered to be adequate for analyzing data; 60 percent is good; and a 70 percent response rate is very good (Babbie, 2016).

**Survey drawbacks.** Despite the fact that surveys and questionnaires are the most common means of obtaining social science data, there are some inherent problems with their use. In the physical sciences, the units of measurement are very precise, but in social science research, we must depend on human beings to provide information—which is subjective—on their feelings and behaviors.

Take the example of a teenage male filling out a survey that assesses how sexually active he is—while sitting beside his very sexually experienced buddy. To impress his friend, the adolescent may overreport his sexual encounters. Conversely, if his friend is an active member of a church youth group that frowns on premarital sex, it is possible the teen male might underreport his sexual activity. Because survey research is dependent on human beings providing human responses about their past and current experiences, there is an inherent risk of overreporting or underreporting certain behaviors. This is referred to as **response bias**, a flaw that may occur when researchers rely on individuals' self-reports.



A structured questionnaire, or a survey instrument, is the most popular way in which family scientists gather data and information.

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Another area of concern is whether surveys reliably assess human behavior, attitudes, and experiences. These may be difficult to assess by rigid, standardized questions. For example, how can research measure “commitment” or “love”? It is quite possible that when responding to a survey, the respondents may want to delve deeper into their responses—which would provide much greater insight into their behavior and feelings—but there is no provision on the survey or questionnaire to do so. Thus, researchers are left with an incomplete understanding of the context of the respondent’s life situation.

As we discussed earlier, much of what researchers examine in social science inquiry are constructs. For this reason, researchers must take care when empirically defining these concepts to ensure that responses are valid. **Validity** speaks to the extent that a researcher is able to provide an empirical definition that reflects the true meaning of what is being studied. For example, if we want to study marital satisfaction, do we want to study the amount of conflict in the couple’s relationship or do we want to study the couple’s mutual love and respect for each other? We have to make sure that our measurements accurately assess what we want them to assess.

The validity of survey research is often criticized because the questions may not really measure what the researchers claim they are measuring. In a sense, what happens is the researcher strains to provide an empirical definition that (ideally) accurately represents a construct, and then the research participant is asked to fit that behavior or emotion to a predetermined scale that may or may not reflect how the respondent wants to answer. In Babbie’s (2016) view, very seldom do our opinions neatly fall into categories of “always,” “sometimes,” “never,” “strongly agree,” “somewhat agree,” and the like. When people are asked to approximate their behavior to fit within a standardized scale, validity is put in jeopardy.

**Observational Research.** Our observations help us understand and make sense of our world. Each of us continuously observes the behavior of others, whether we are craning our necks to see who is going into whose dorm room, or whether we’re driving slowly by a vehicle accident. Our media-savvy society allows us to peer into the lives of bachelors and bachelorettes seeking “true love” through reality TV programming. The problem with reality TV, however, is that it is part reality and part entertainment, and what we ultimately observe is not “real” at all. Social science inquiry requires a much more systematic method of observation.

The **observational research method** is a systematic process in that (1) the observation is systematically planned, (2) the data are gathered and recorded in a systematic format, and (3) systematic checks and balances assess the reliability and validity of the observations (Kidder, 1981). Observational research can take place either in a laboratory-like setting, such as a married couple in a counseling session being observed behind a one-way glass, or the more natural setting that we call **field research**. In both cases, investigators want to objectively record and describe the behavior that is being observed.

Researcher Kidder (1981) described three purposes of using observational research:

1. *Observational research may be performed for purposes of description*, such as describing how children respond immediately after viewing a violent video clip or how infants respond when their parents leave them unattended.
2. *This research method is used when the subject matter does not lend itself to other methods*. For example, in 2019, hundreds of immigrant children were separated from their parents at the United States southern border and detained in prison-like facilities. If researchers were present at these detainment sites, they could more accurately record the immediate reactions and responses of the children, directly assess the impact of the separation trauma for these children, and ultimately implement immediate interventions and create counseling programs that truly meet and reflect the needs of the children to move forward in healthy ways.
3. *Observational research is appropriate when other research methods are inaccurate*. When trying, for example, to ascertain information about behaviors, experiences, and attitudes, observational research may enable researchers to observe and record accurate descriptions of behavior that other methods would not permit. The results of such studies may, in some cases, be representative of the larger population and not just relevant to the sample studied. For instance, if we wanted to better understand the effects of the long-term displacement of

immigrant families and parents being separated from their children, observing their behaviors and experiences would yield much more valuable information than a survey, which might not be able to fully capture the feelings and attitudes of the victims. These observational experiences could then be used to formulate policies and educational programs that promote family health, home relocation/replacement, and family reunification following immigration.

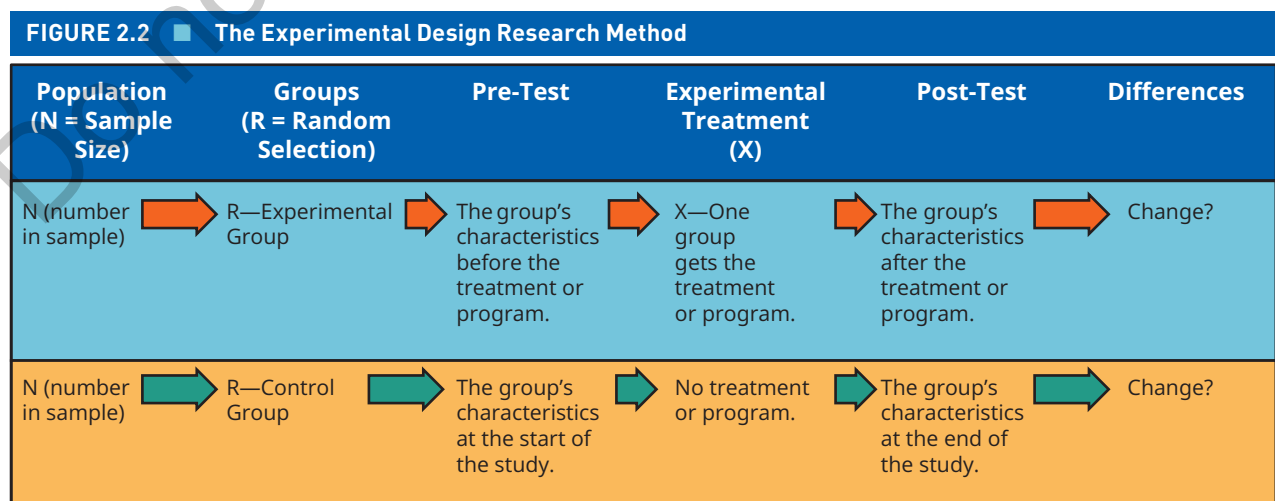
**Case Study.** The **case study** methodology involves study of either a single person or a small group of people. Case studies are often used to obtain an in-depth understanding of emotional and/or behavioral patterns by providing detailed descriptions of either an individual case or a group of case studies related to one another. When a comprehensive (almost biographical) description is needed or desired, researchers turn to case studies. Sometimes an area of interest is so new that one-by-one case studies are the means by which the data are gathered and new theories are subsequently generated; other times the area under investigation is an uncommon or rare occurrence, such as our examples of immigrant children being separated from their families and detained.

Aside from the drawback of being time consuming for the researcher, case study methodology findings may be limited in that they are not typically *generalizable*—applicable—to the larger population. For example, although the case studies of the migrant children provide very valuable information about the effects of family separation and trauma on children, researchers cannot assume that these effects could be generalized to children in war-torn Iraq. Case studies do not allow us to see cause-and-effect relationships.

**Experimental Design.** **Experimental design** is used to determine causal relationships among variables. Conducting experimental design research requires researchers to control the experimental procedure—controlling or holding constant the variables being studied in order to determine which variable is, indeed, effecting the change in the other variable.

An experimental design consists of two groups: the **experimental group** is the group that is exposed to the independent variables under question; the **control group** is treated exactly the same as the experimental group, except they are not exposed to the independent variable (see Figure 2.2).

A limitation of experimental research is that the laboratory is an artificial environment in which to study human response. Consider, for example, the reality TV show *The Bachelorette*. When Jed headed to Los Angeles to woo Bachelorette Hannah in front of millions of viewers, were their relationship and emotions authentic? For instance, what if the producers of the television show omitted the fact that Jed had a girlfriend back home, and the only reason he appeared on *The Bachelorette* was to further his music career? Would these people be acting the way they act or saying what they do if the cameras were not on them? The answer is no. In other words, we have to consider how much the presence of the camera is influencing their behavior. In this same vein, how much does the knowledge of an experiment alter an individual's behavior?





One of the most important steps in the research method is selecting a population or a sample to be examined. Researchers can use either a probability (random) sample or a nonprobability (not random) sample.

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**Step 6. Selecting a Population and Sampling.** After a researcher has conceptualized the research, empirically defined all constructs/concepts under investigation, and chosen the type of research method to be used, the next step in the research process involves selecting a population or sample to be studied. In the military research, the examiners wanted to study the effect of separation on marital satisfaction among service members. The researcher could not possibly locate all the service men and women in that **population** (the entire group of people who shared this experience); to overcome this, a researcher selects a sample from the population under investigation.

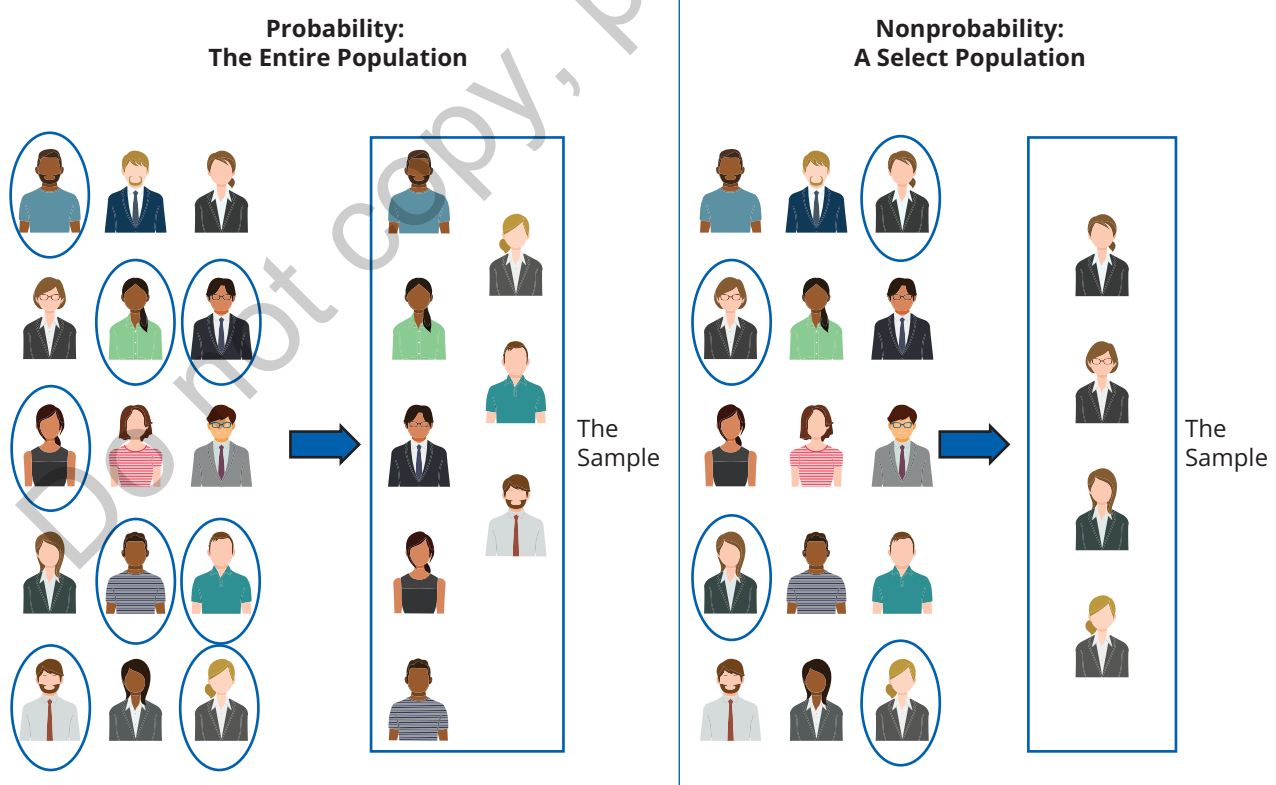
In the social sciences, our investigation of people's behavior and emotional states must take into account people's differ-

ences. For this reason, we have to be very precise and deliberate in our selection of whom we study via sampling. There are two types of sampling: probability sampling and nonprobability sampling (see Figure 2.3).

Probability sampling is necessary because not every person in every population shares exact characteristics. In a **probability** (random) **sample**, each person has the same likelihood (probability) of being selected for the study. In probability sampling, the notion of **representativeness**, or the degree to which the characteristics of the population are represented by the sample, is key. The **sample size** also affects the degree to which the sample is considered to be representative. Statistics gathered based on probability samples are used to draw conclusions about the sample because researchers can reasonably assess the amount of sampling error that is expected to occur.

**Nonprobability samples** are not selected randomly but are used when the use of probability samples is impossible. For example, when the investigators decided to study U.S. service members, it was

**FIGURE 2.3** ■ Research Samples



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not feasible for the researcher to select a probability sample from the population at large (what would their chances be that their sample would include people who had served overseas?); they instead used a nonprobability sample.

**Step 7. Collecting, Processing, and Analyzing Data.** Only after careful methodological planning of the total research design is the social scientist ready to collect, process, and analyze the data. These processes are beyond the scope of our discussion here, but it is vitally important for novice researchers to understand the relevance and necessity of each step in the design process. Although inexperienced researchers may be eager to collect data in an area that is of great interest to them, and even though it might be tempting for experienced researchers to become lax and complacent in research design, less-than-desirable results are almost assured. Remember, these steps are not necessarily sequential; the overlap among the design elements is continuous throughout the entire investigative procedure. A poor research design almost always produces poor research results.

**Step 8. Applying Research Findings.** Once a researcher collects, processes, and analyzes the data generated from the research, the findings of the study are usually presented in some type of format (such as a journal or professional conference) for scholars, researchers, policy makers, or other users to employ. Some may choose to use their findings to support and bring about societal change through the creation of family policy. Other researchers may elect to have their study reviewed by colleagues and then publish the research process and findings in a journal devoted to a given area of study, such as the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, the *Journal of Sex Research*, the *Journal of Men's Studies*, and *Family Relations*, to name a few. Still other researchers may use their research findings and research skills to design, implement, and evaluate family life education programs that promote the health and functioning of today's families.

## BECOMING A CONSUMER OF THE LITERATURE

How do we separate truth from untruth, fact from fiction? Through the process of research. Despite its inherent flaws, social science research is the only method by which we can gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of couples, relationships, family, and family life.

### Making Sense of It All: How to Read Social Science Literature

Now that you understand the research design process, we will focus on how to get the most out of research and how to distinguish well-written, valid research from poorly designed research that yields invalid or insignificant results. A colleague of mine who teaches graduate-level social science research methods courses makes the point that those interested in family and family life need to become *consumers* of the literature. By making the time to separate the wheat from the chaff, so to speak, you will be better able to draw meaningful conclusions as you read (consume) the social science literature. You will learn to discern.

#### Learn to Discern

Many readers in search of information tend to skip over the results section of a research article and jump directly to the more engaging, accessible discussion section where authors take the liberty to interpret the results of their study. Most authors include within the discussion a section devoted to the limitations of the current study. Many novice consumers of the literature, however, are also novices when it comes to interpreting what they are reading, and they mistakenly assume the discussion section portrays a precise interpretation of the results section. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

Throughout this book, you will notice numerous research citations that substantiate the information that is conveyed. These citations or references refer to research or findings presented by an author or several authors. As you read research, consider the following questions to ensure that it is valid and reliable.

### Are the Purposes of the Research and/or the Hypotheses Clearly Stated?

Be wary of research that does not specifically state the intended purpose of the research or present a clearly stated research hypothesis at the outset. There is an expression, “Anyone can make any research say anything.” Although educated consumers of the literature will avoid this pitfall, to a certain extent this statement is true. **Data churning**, or “fishing,” refers to the practice of devising the purposes of the research or formulating a research hypothesis *after* the data are gathered and analyzed. Data churning reduces the value of statistical findings because, sooner or later, something that appears to be statistically significant will turn out that way simply because of random chance.

### What Is the Method by Which the Data Are Collected?

Researchers obtain data by asking carefully constructed questions or through the direct observation of behavior. Because surveys and questionnaires are the means by which the majority of social science information is gathered, it is important to examine the survey instrument (a questionnaire, for example) and the survey process.

The content of surveys and/or questionnaires largely depends on the purpose of the study (exploration, description, or explanation) and the type of information the researcher is hoping to gather. Types of question content areas may include the following:

1. Content aimed at ascertaining facts
2. Content aimed at ascertaining beliefs about the facts
3. Content aimed at ascertaining feelings
4. Content aimed at discovering standards of action
5. Content aimed at past or present behavior
6. Content designed to discover beliefs, feelings, and behavior (Kidder, 1981)

When scrutinizing surveys, look at how demanding the questions are. Are they asking people to articulate, recall, and express detailed information? Are the questions written in a biased format to elicit desired statements, or are they unbiased and open? For instance, if a survey posed the question, “Why did President Trump make the wrong decision in deciding to detain children of immigrants?” it would be asking a biased question because the way this question is constructed presupposes a value on his decision (the word *wrong*). As a careful reader, consider what questions skew the results of the study. Are the questions too vague? Too precise? Has the researcher assumed too much about the respondents’ behavior? Has the researcher assumed too much about the respondents’ knowledge base?

### How Was the Study Sample Selected? Is the Sample Representative?

What constitutes a “good” study sample? In order for a study sample to represent a desired population under investigation, a probability sample is the research method of choice. By employing randomization—a sample that ensures everyone has an equal chance of being selected—the researcher minimizes the possibility of misleading results. Does the study sample have enough participants from the population under inquiry so that statistical approximations can be made? Or is the sample, instead, a **convenience sample** or a volunteer sample? A sample that is not scientifically selected calls even the most well-intended research into question.

### What Is the Response Rate?

In order to fully interpret the meaning of statistical data, it is imperative that consumers of the literature understand the composition of the study participants. To determine the applicability of survey findings, the response rate must be sizable. Recall from our earlier discussion that in social science research, a response rate of 50 percent is considered a “good” response rate. Why is this an important measure? The response rate is an indicator of how representative the survey or questionnaire is; the higher the response rate, the more likely it is that the survey responses reflect the population under



investigation. For example, in the military group under study, of the 200 married service personnel, 113 responded to the survey—or about 57 percent of the population under investigation. Of these 113 soldiers, 70 percent provided data throughout the length of the study.

Investigators must also understand the makeup of the population. Are the respondents' characteristics more heavily concentrated in one area than another? (This may or may not pose a problem, depending on the intended purpose of the research.) Equally important is the consideration of who *did not* respond.

### What Is the Weight of the Evidence for Conclusions?

Always be wary of claims that cite “most” or “many” or “several,” if the sample size is not known. Ask yourself, “Most, many, or several of what number?” When viewing data that are represented by percentages, immediately ask, “X percentage of how many?” In other words, is the percentage reported 33.3 percent of a sample of *three*, or of *three hundred thousand*? Whether data are presented in graphic form, such as a bar graph, or in tables that present percentages, keep the percentages in perspective. Always know the sample size and response rate before trusting the percentages.

### Do Confounding (Rival) Factors Exist?

**Confounding (or rival) variables** are variables that are unrelated, unconnected, or not pertinent to the variables under investigation, which can skew or affect the results of the study. Results are often influenced by these extraneous factors. My college statistics professor gave an example of confounding variables in a study that sought to determine who had the greater incidence of cancer, individuals who ate oatmeal or individuals who consumed Kellogg's Frosted Flakes. The researchers found that individuals who ate oatmeal had higher rates of cancer than those who ate Frosted Flakes. The confounding variable? Those who ate oatmeal were older than those who ate Frosted Flakes—*age* was the contributing factor to incidence of cancer, not what was consumed for breakfast!

Whether you are preparing to become a social worker, an educator, a family life educator, a member of the clergy, a child life specialist, or any type of human services provider, the very nature of your profession calls on you to make judgments and assessments about the reliability and validity of research results.

It is the researcher's ethical responsibility to present information in a forthright and honest manner, but it is also the consumer's responsibility to determine the sufficiency of the research process and the dependability of the results. It is together in the researcher/consumer enterprise that reliable, repeatable, useful information is obtained through social science investigation.

### Research Ethics and Integrity

The practice of social science research is an endeavor that requires responsible conduct on the part of the researcher, particularly in light of the fact that human subjects are the object of study. The federal government sets procedural guidelines to ensure that researchers conduct their research ethically and with integrity.

In general, **ethics** refers to the principals or standards of people's conduct or the principals of right and good. In the realm of social science research, ethics refers to the rules and standards that govern researchers' conduct as they examine human behaviors, feelings, and attitudes (National Academy of Sciences, 2021; Resnik, 2020). Following research procedural guidelines set forth by the federal government, and to ensure the ethical treatment of research subjects, academic institutions and other research institutions have established research review committees, or **Institutional Review Boards (IRBs)**. Often, IRBs are referred to as *human subjects committees*. Before pursuing a research plan, scientists must first gain the approval of their institution's IRB. These committees are concerned with the study participants' safety and well-being, ensuring that all participants have been fully informed of the true nature of the research and have been assured of privacy and confidentiality (Qiao, 2018).

Scientific endeavors are based on trust: IRBs trust researchers to abide by the ethical guidelines that are set in place to ensure the protection of research subjects; study subjects trust researchers to treat them with care and concern; academic and medical communities trust that the results reported

by researchers are accurate and valid; and society trusts that research results are accurate and not biased (National Academy of Sciences, 2018).

Whereas research ethics is concerned with the relationship between the researcher and the research subjects, **research integrity** is concerned with the relationship between researchers and the truth in reporting their findings (Metcalfe et al., 2020). In other words, is it good, reliable science? Research integrity requires

- A competent research design plan
- No manipulation of the data to construe the results one way or another
- Sound statistical methods
- No falsification of the results
- No fabrication of the results
- Sharing the results with the academic and/or medical world
- Giving credit where credit is due (citing research sources used in the gathering and publishing of research findings)

As you can see, the process of social science research is a carefully crafted balance of research design, research ethics, and research integrity. Discovering ways through research to strengthen families and the quality of family life is a tedious yet exhilarating experience. Within the social sciences, it is especially rewarding to know that our research efforts have direct impact on the populations we care deeply and passionately about. It is through research that family practitioners and social scientists create educational programs and family policies that serve humankind. Research also promotes the creation of family theories.

## UNDERSTANDING FAMILIES THROUGH THEORY

Because we all consider ourselves knowledgeable about family life, it can be quite tempting to make assertions about a form of family behavior we consider to be “right” or “wrong” based on our personal experience. But “family life” extends well beyond our personal worlds. One way to understand and envision “family” beyond our own worlds is to expand our knowledge through theories.

Strongly held beliefs about what constitutes “family” have molded, and at times dominated, services available to families and family policy. Yet, in order to move beyond these commonly held assumptions and common beliefs about family, family scientists and theorists cannot rely on widely held suppositions about family; rather, they must study the family empirically.

A solid, foundational knowledge base in family theory is essential for students of and professionals interested in the fields of couple and family life. Throughout our study, we will examine several theories and frameworks that are fundamental to the understanding of human behavior and family relationship patterns. In the family sciences, a **theory** is a general principle that is used to understand or to explain certain events or family experiences, such as family communication or family crisis (Birks & Mills, 2023). As one social scientist noted, “Theories can simply be seen as a thinking tool we use in our attempts to explain human behavior. . . . It is a guide to help us understand why humans do and think the way they do,” (Madden, 2023, p. 3). A **framework** is a systematic structure for classifying families, their behaviors, or their experiences (Partelow, 2023). Theories profoundly affect what we know about families because they provide structure for how we think about families, what we observe, how we interpret what we observe, and how we use this information to create programs and introduce policies that affect and enhance family life (Smith, 1995). In short, a theory allows us to move beyond our everyday, common beliefs about family and move toward an objective, scientific understanding of family and family processes.

## An Introduction to Family Theories

We do not develop in a vacuum. The most significant influence on both our individual development and our ability to relate to others, by far, is our *family of origin*. Our family is the base from which we venture out and learn to share ourselves in close and intimate relationships. The ability to share ourselves is a complicated, elaborate mixture of our own individual development and our family experiences (whatever they might be). Our family history also plays a significant role, as generations before produced our grandparents and parents—those who have influenced us the most.

Today, many theories exist that attempt to explain the workings of family, and each has made numerous contributions to the field of family studies. James White, Todd Martin, and Kari Adamsons, authors of *Family Theories: An Introduction* (2019), describe today's prevailing family theories:

1. *Ecological theory* is concerned with the many social and cultural contexts that affect family living. As you learned in Chapter 1, these contexts include factors that exert immediate influences on the family, such as schools, churches or temples, and neighborhoods. Other contexts include the government, educational systems, the political system, and the overarching value system of a given society (Crawford, 2020).
2. *Family Development theory* divides the experiences of family into phases, or stages, of normative changes associated with family growth and development, such as the birth of children and the launching of these children into early adulthood. This theory is concerned with understanding the changes in family structures and the roles of family members across each stage of family development. According to this theory, healthy families are able to adapt to these changes across time (Crapo & Bradford, 2021).
3. *Conflict theory* maintains that society shapes individual and family behavior. At the core of this theory is the notion that conflict is normal and expected in families and in society. Thus, to understand families, conflict theory maintains that we need to understand the sources of conflict and the sources of power (Prayogi, 2023).
4. *Family Systems theory* concentrates on the interactions between family members, and it views the family as an interconnected group of individual members whose behaviors affect and are affected by other family members' behaviors. What happens to one family member, such as an illness or a loss of a job, affects every family member (Gavazzi & Lim, 2023). (Chapter 3 provides an in-depth discussion about Family Systems theory.)
5. *Symbolic Interaction theory* concerns itself with how people form and share meanings in their communication efforts. Its primary focus is the use of symbols to convey meaning through verbal and nonverbal communication (Sichach, 2023). (We examine this theory at length in Chapter 3.)
6. *Social Exchange theory* (discussed in Chapter 7) focuses on the costs and rewards associated with our human behaviors. In short, this theory maintains that people weigh costs and rewards before they decide to act—we engage in behavior that brings us maximum rewards and minimum costs. According to this theory, we form relationships with other people if we expect that the relationship will be rewarding. It is human nature to avoid relationships that we perceive will be costly to us (Ahmad et al., 2023).

Because of the family life education approach of this textbook, and because of this book's topical nature, as we work our way through our study we will focus on the foundations of various family theories and how they help us understand the intricacies of our interpersonal relationships. We will examine the theories throughout the coming chapters as they relate to certain topics. We begin by looking at what is recognized by many family specialists and sociologists as the “grandfather of family theory”: Structural Functionalism.

## FAMILY LIFE NOW

### Do Fathers Matter?

Are children reared by lesbian mothers as well adjusted as children who are raised in families with a mother and a father? This is a question that social and family scientists have sought to answer for nearly four decades. As you become a consumer of the empirical research and literature, it's important to understand that, in most instances, bodies of research often support one side of the argument or the other—rarely today is there a clear-cut, definitive answer to what can be, at times, polarizing questions. To provide you an example of this, let's look at a research question that still today poses heated debate among some group: Do fathers matter in the lives of children?

**YES:** According to several bodies of research, fathers positively influence children's development in four areas of well-being:

- Behavior: Children with involved fathers exhibit less aggression and have fewer incidents of delinquency.
- Emotional/psychological: When fathers are engaged in their children's lives, children are better able to self-regulate their emotions; they experience anxiety and depression less frequently than children who do not have involved fathers.
- Cognitive/academic: Children with engaged fathers have more success in school.
- Social: As children get older, those who have fathers actively involved in their lives are more likely to have stronger social connections with their peers. (Behson et al., 2018; Hehman & Salmon, 2021; Li et al., 2023).

Another study found that fathers' behaviors and interactions with their children both directly (as noted) and indirectly positively influence children's development (Cabrera et al., 2018). For example, the quality of children's home experiences is increased with the presence of a father. The relationship with the children's mother, whether it is in the marital home or coparental interactions, also increases the emotional well-being of children.

**NO:** Today, same-sex couples are four times more likely than opposite-sex couples to raise adopted children and seven times more likely to foster children (Williams Institute, 2020). There is sound evidence that children who are raised by same-sex parents are happy and well adjusted (for a complete review, see Gartrell et al., 2012; Williams Institute, 2020;):

- Adolescents raised by lesbian mothers indicate that their overall quality of life is equal to or higher than their peers raised by heterosexual parents.
- The stress children and adolescents experience is related to the quality of a couple's relationship, not the sexual orientation of the parents or the presence of a father in the home.
- Teens with lesbian mothers are academically successful and are more likely to attend college upon high school graduation.
- Children and teens of lesbian mothers report that their mothers are good role models.
- Adolescents indicate that they have strong peer relationships who are predominantly heterosexual.

According to the findings of several researchers, the involvement of fathers in lesbian couple parenting experiences isn't important—rather, the quality of family relationships is more important than the sexual orientation of parents.

### What Do You Think?

1. Are children's outcomes related to the sex of the parent, or are they a reflection of good or highly motivated parenting?
2. What are some potential limitations for each research position? For example, what conclusions can be drawn without knowing the sample size and who was actually being studied?
3. In what ways does this help you to become a better consumer of research studies?

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Sources: Behson et al. (2018); Gartrell et al. (2012); The Williams Institute (2020).

## Structural Functionalism

Perhaps the most influential contributor to the study of family and family life is Talcott Parsons (1902–1979). Out of his passion to investigate the wide range of problems concerning American values, social

structure, social problems, and patterns of institutional change, Parsons devised the **Structural-Functionalist theory** of the family (Fox et al., 2005). This theory has continued to influence family theory for 30 years.

Parsons's functionalist view of the family maintained that gender-based role specialization was necessary in order to promote family (and, hence, societal) equilibrium. **Instrumental roles** were assigned to the husband-father, who, as the task-oriented mate, was assigned responsibility for being the primary breadwinner and protector against imbalance or disequilibrium. To complement the male, the wife-mother was assigned **expressive roles**, the people-oriented mate responsible for enhancing emotional relationships among the members of the family (Boss et al., 1993). According to Parsons, then, the 1950s heterosexual, nuclear breadwinner-homemaker family represented the most functional of all family forms (Parsons, 1951). To be sure, Parsonian thought heralded the belief that if men and women abided by their gender-specific roles, not only would the family unit be ensured stability and solidity, but society at large would similarly benefit.

Although some of the original ideas of this theory have been discarded because of their patriarchal nature (such as the belief that the “correct” family form is that of a man, woman, and child), many of the theory's assumptions are still in use today. Much of what you will see in other family theories in this text are clear descendants of functionalism.

### Key Concepts of Structural Functionalism

At the heart of Structural Functionalism rests the notion that society is considered to be a whole that is made up of separate, interconnected parts, and that this whole (social system) seeks maintenance and stability in order for it to persist and endure. Functionalism also holds that each subsystem (or social unit) seeks balance or homeostasis; a change in one unit effects a change in the other units in order for balance to be maintained. The core of Structural Functionalism is that each member of the social system conforms to a certain set of clearly defined rules or beliefs that exist for the sole purpose of advancing the greater good and continued existence of the society to which the individual belongs (Garner, 2019). In other words, the whole social system must survive, and it cannot survive without individual members working together toward its continued existence by way of certain functional requirements (Boss et al., 1993, p. 196), such as sexual reproduction, economic reproduction, education, and religion (Bernardes, 2000). This theory derives its name in part because of the function of each subsystem—the contribution—to the survival of the whole societal system. A subsystem's function can contribute either in a positive fashion (functional) or a negative fashion (dysfunctional) to the society.

In order for functions to contribute to the overall good of the society, they must adhere to **structures**, or patterns of role arrangement. For example, the family is thought to be a key subsystem because it promotes the survival of the societal system by providing new members through procreation and by socializing children to conform to societal beliefs, norms, and ways of life (Boss et al., 1993). According to structural functionalists, the traditional nuclear family has historically been thought to best promote the needs of the larger society. A *nuclear family* is defined as the “socially sanctioned cohabitation [marriage] of a man and a woman who have preferential or exclusive enjoyment of economic and sexual rights over one another and are committed to raise the children brought to life by the woman” (Pitts, 1964). This definition clearly delineates social organization and properties of the family system, as the following conditions illustrate:

1. The marital couple assumes the responsibility of childrearing, and such specialized roles increase the functionality of the system.



According to Structural-Functionalist theory, males adopt instrumental roles such as providing for the family, while females adopt expressive roles, such as keeping the home and nurturing the husband and children.

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2. The man and the woman have exclusive economic and sexual rights over one another. According to Boss and colleagues, such clearly outlined marital roles establish well-defined rights and obligations to one another—and thus, to the society at large.
3. With the clearly specified roles that foster exclusive economic and sexual rights over one another, in addition to bearing and rearing children within the socially sanctioned form of cohabitation, these types of role specialization underscore the most significant property of a system—its ability to maintain homeostasis or balance. When family balance is enhanced, the overall equilibrium of the society is reinforced, as well. (Boss et al., 1993)

Structural Functionalism dominated sociological theory from the early 1940s through the 1960s, then fell out of the theoretical limelight; however, despite being considered obsolete by some scholars, particularly feminist scholars, other academics believe that Structural Functionalism still governs much study of family sociology and family life (Boss et al., 1993; Smith, 1995).

### Structural Functionalism and the Family

Structural Functionalism emphasizes the traditional, heterosexual nuclear family and highlights two primary functions of the family in society: the socialization of children to society's culture and norms and the stabilization of adult personalities. This view revolves around the idea that the family is organized and governed by unchangeable, fixed, irreversible role configurations—and that these gender-specific family functions operate in order to benefit the family itself as well as to promote the greater good of the society. With these functions and family structures in mind, let's take a look at research that addresses the increasing occurrence of same-sex couples bearing or adopting children.

In 2002, the American Academy of Pediatrics supported legislation permitting lesbian partners to co-parent children born to one partner or adopted by the couple. The Academy maintained that children reared in lesbian families “can have the same advantages and the same expectations . . . for adjustment, and development” as those children reared in heterosexual families (p. 339). And, as you will see in our study together throughout this course (see Chapters 10, 11, and 12), a number of contemporary research findings suggest that no substantial differences exist between lesbian and heterosexual parents in affective development or areas of self-concept, happiness, and overall adjustment. Dr. Susan Golombok (1983, 1999), founder of the Family and Child Psychology Research Centre at City University, London, further maintains that children of lesbian mother families do not appear to demonstrate greater instances of psychological disorders, difficulties in peer relationships, or atypical gender development. As for sexual orientation, Golombok notes that most children reared in lesbian families identified with heterosexuality.

If we were to apply Parsons's Structural-Functionalist theoretical framework to this research, the *male* husband-(always)father and the *female* wife-(always)mother, we see the theory calls into question the function of same-sex couples. Recall, too, that these specialized gender roles allow the family to successfully carry out its chief function of socializing the children to the predominant beliefs and norms of the culture.

If we compare Parsons's assigned roles to roles depicted in contemporary research on lesbian parenting, where there exist two family members—*both female* wife-mothers—what happens to family stability? When two women rear children and do not abide by clearly outlined, specialized gender roles, what happens to the family structure? By Parsonian assumption, the lesbian parenting family form deviates from the ideal family form, and as such should turn out children who are nonconforming to societal norms. But is this what studies of lesbian parenting suggest? On the contrary, the studies indicate that children born into and/or reared by lesbian parents show no significant negative or harmful effects in the children's emotional development, self-concepts, or overall adjustment (Baiocco et al., 2015; Baiocco et al., 2019; Bos et al., 2016; Farr, 2017). In fact, there appear to be no differences between children of lesbian parents and children of heterosexual parents. According to current research, then, the gender of the parents doesn't affect children's sexual orientation. The only parenting factor that is important is that the children are being cared for in a nurturing environment. One could perhaps argue, however, that one lesbian parent assumed the instrumental role and the other assumed the expressive role and that as long as both roles were filled, one's gender doesn't matter.

Structural Functionalism may be considered the grandfather of family theories, but many more theories have been created to shed new perspectives on intimate and family life today.

## Conflict Theory

Similar to Structural Functionalism, **Conflict theory** concentrates primarily on social structures and their interrelationships. Like Structural Functionalism, Conflict theory supports the notion that society has some bearing on and to some degree shapes individual behavior (Prayogi, 2023). This paradigm differs, however, in its basic theme that human beings are prone to conflict—that conflict between members of the human race is expected, natural, and inevitable.

Why is there conflict? According to the conflict perspective, inequality is a defining trait built into any society or culture. Dominant and subordinate groups and classes within society are always in competition for the society's limited resources and for whatever the society deems important. It is the competition for resources—with the “haves” competing to keep what they possess and the “have nots” trying to gain what they do not have—that produces conflict (Prayogi, 2023). For example, there is economic inequality in nearly every society. Some society members will always have more economic resources than others, while some will always have less.

Because of these inequalities, some society members inherently have more power and control than others. According to Conflict theory, then, friction, discord, disputes, tensions, and antagonism are normal and natural societal experiences.

The big question in Conflict theory is, Who benefits at whose expense? Nineteenth-century social theorist and political activist Karl Marx sought to answer this question.

### Karl Marx and Class Struggles

Karl Marx (1818–1883) was a German economist who viewed the world through the perspective that every aspect of human life is based on economics and economic relationships. Indeed, Marx believed that the economic system was the driving force, the real foundation, of any society. His viewpoint revolutionized the ways in which people think about social arrangements and human society.

Marx observed that during the Industrial Revolution (the late 18th and early 19th centuries) in Europe, there appeared to be two fundamental, distinct classes of people. The owners or ruling class—the capitalists—possessed the land, businesses, and factories. The working class—the proletariat—was subordinate to the demands of the ruling class. Their value was based on how much they could produce as a result of their labor. Class was determined by means of one's production and one's productivity. Marx was outraged at the cruel and vicious treatment that factory workers and their families endured at the hands of the ruling class and concluded that owners exploited workers by paying them far less than their work was worth, in order to gain economic (and hence, societal) power. The economic exploitation of the working class led to oppression. Further, Marx believed that the ruling class used its economic power to gain more control of the society, such as using police power to protect its property. Marxian theory supports the notion that the function of every social institution (such as the educational system, religious institutions, and even marriage and the family) is to support the society's class structure.

This exploitative economic composition of capitalism—the class struggle—is the root of all conflict because the two classes have opposing interests and unequal balance of power. And it is because of this unequal balance of power that conflict is an inherent part of human existence and human relationships. Who benefits at whose expense? The capitalists can only pursue their individual needs, goals, and resources at the expense of the proletariat. Thus, Marxian theory holds that because of the inequality of power, the working class would organize and begin a revolution to establish a classless society wherein the society's wealth, resources, and power would be evenly distributed among the members. But what does social inequality have to do with marriage and the family?

### Conflict Theory and the Family

Conflict theorists view the family as a social institution composed of varying relationships. These relationships benefit some family members more than others. Throughout history, women and children were considered to be the property of men. Consequently, in relationships between men and women,

one class (men) exploited and oppressed the other class (women) in order to gain resources and power. In fact, according to conflict theorists, the entire reason marriage evolved as a legal contract was to protect the property of men.

As Marxian theory illustrates, property owners wielded power. In most societies, the power possessed by men is endorsed by social norms. In other words, because society approves of men attaining higher educational levels and employment opportunities or capitalist endeavors than women, men are able to pursue particular self-interests that afford them more power than the women who are relegated to the home to provide unpaid labor and childcare. Conflict theory suggests that men do not do housework (despite the fact that nearly 60 percent of today's workforce is composed of women) because it is not profitable for them to do so (Doan & Quadlin, 2018; U.S. Department of Labor, 2024). Thus, the family as a social structure perpetuates or maintains the inequalities and imbalance of power in male-female relationships. This inequality is reinforced as children are socialized according to the same male-dominant paradigm. This, then, perpetuates social norms that contribute to the class system.

Throughout your course of study, you will see discussed at length in subsequent chapters a number of social conflicts that some sociologists and family scientists would argue are a direct result of the inequalities of power in family structures: family violence, the feminization of poverty, divorce, single motherhood, and violence against the elderly. Although Conflict theory is not frequently used in family studies to shed light on marriage and family life, its application is of great value when examining the inequalities in human relationships and factors such as gender, ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic class. Conflict theory survives today in its contemporary form—Feminist theory.

### Women's Studies: Feminist Theory

**Feminist theory** embraces the conflict approach to understanding and analyzing the roles of marriage and family in perpetuating inequalities in male-female relationships (Andermahr & Davis, 2023). Because most societies the world over promote male domination in the home and in the workplace, feminism, or Feminist theory, focuses on the plight of women.

There is no single Feminist theory; rather, there are a number of feminist perspectives that apply to sociological and family studies that help us better understand human behavior. A theory is deemed Feminist theory if it (1) centers on the experiences specific to women, (2) views experiences from a woman's vantage point, and (3) advocates on behalf of women (Lengermann & Brantley, 1988). Types of Feminist theory, outlined by authors MaryAnn Schwartz and Barbara Scott (2003), include the following:



Feminist movements and organizations, such as the National Organization of Women (NOW), focus their efforts on experiences that are unique to women, such as reproductive rights and violence that is perpetrated against women.

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- *Marxist Feminist theory*, similar to Marx's theory, maintains that the inequality and oppression that women experience is a result of women's subordinate class position (Griffin, 2017).
- *Radical Feminist theory* states that the universal oppression that women experience is a result of patriarchy (male-dominated society). Violence against women is another consequence of patriarchy (Duriesmith & Meger, 2020).
- *Liberal Feminist theory* views the inequality and oppression of women as a result of sexism—the belief that men are superior and women are inferior. Liberal feminists focus their efforts on issues of equal opportunity, such as in the workplace and in education (Griffin, 2017).
- *Lesbian Feminist theory* focuses primarily on the predominance of heterosexuality in patriarchal (male-dominated) societies. Adherents to this theory believe that in order to fully understand women's inequality, attention must be given to the oppression of lesbians (Allen et al., 2022).
- *Women-of-Color Feminist theory*, along with sexism and classism, focuses its attention on forms of racism—the belief that women of color are inferior to white men and women. According to this perspective, women do not share common experiences; instead, they are thought to be molded by their unique experiences of race, class, and societal and cultural influences (Zavella, 2022).

These different types of feminist theory indicate there are a number of ways in which the feminist perspective can be applied to the study of family and intimate relationships. Many researchers use these theories to acknowledge that there is great diversity not just between men and women, but among women. These perspectives help them explain individual experiences within the contexts these theories provide.

Do men and women engage in power struggles in today's marriages? If so, what is it about contemporary society that accounts for this conflict in marriages (Guvensel et al., 2017)? Do gender differences affect the day-to-day lives of today's families (Minkin & Menasce Horowitz, 2023; Young & Schieman, 2017)? If so, what generates or perpetuates these gender differences and how are they expressed? Are gender differences necessarily a bad thing—or a good thing (Maney, 2016)?

For Feminist theorists, the aim of family research is to determine why and how gender inequality and power differences develop and are sustained and maintained in family life. Feminist theorists may question, for example, whether women's oppression is inherent because of the predominance of the patriarchal family structure seen throughout the world. Or instead, they may question whether these differences, perpetuated through the processes of marriage and family living, affect the way children are socialized. Are these behaviors and interaction patterns then repeated when these children mature, marry, and start families of their own? Throughout this course of study, you will see how much of what we learn as infants and children through our family of origin is reinforced in subsequent interpersonal relationships throughout our lives.

## Men's Studies

We've just discussed how male–female inequality causes conflict, antagonism, and tension. In this section, we will view gender differences from another perspective: that of “being male.” Women's studies courses and degree programs have been offered at U.S. universities and colleges for the past 30 years, but men's studies have not.

Sam McCready is the co-director of the Center for Young Men's Studies at the University of Ulster, Northern Ireland. He and his colleagues maintain that with the ushering in of the feminist movement and the influence of feminist studies, and because of the significant cultural changes seen in the past three decades with the dawn of women's studies (and the resultant changes in roles and responsibilities for men), the study of men with a particular lens is necessary (Barry, 2023; McCready et al., 2006). Since the 1990s, organizations that examine issues specific to men's lives have emerged, such as the American Men's Studies Association (AMSA) and the National Coalition of Free Men. Empirical journals and print media, such as the *Journal of Men's Studies* and *Men's Lives*, devote their

scholarship to important areas of men's lives, such as defining gender roles and exploring shifting definitions of masculinity. The primary objective in men's studies has been to encourage scholarship in an effort to generate theory specific to the study of masculinity, as well as to shun all forms of oppression—sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism (Mellström, 2023). To be clear, men's studies is not a negative reaction to feminism, but instead it is a useful area of study that helps to promote gender equality.



Today, scholars pay increasing attention to the socialization and cultural expectations of men, such as how their roles are changing to include the nurturing and care of children.

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Empirical research in men's lives has been prompted by the fact that, as one professor of a university men's studies program observes, men are victims of sexism and sexist norms in society; men, similar to women, also exist under oppression because of their social conditioning (Davis, 2018; Emmons & MocarSKI, 2014; Laughlin, 2005). In other words, because of their social learning and conditioning, men are limited in their emotional capacities and in how they can express their personalities (Barry, 2023). This social conditioning may, in fact, limit men's career choices. As a result of these socially imposed limitations, men may feel oppressed. It is the basic assumption of men's studies, then, that sexism and gender affect men's lives as significantly as they do the lives of women (Barry, 2023; Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Manzi, 2019; McCready et al., 2006).

Like women's and feminist studies, **men's studies** investigate the multiple social and cultural forces and issues that affect men. It is an interdisciplinary academic field devoted to topics concerning men, such as sex, gender, politics, and sexuality. Men's studies academically explore what it means to be a "man" in contemporary society (American Men's Studies Association, 2020). It is an umbrella term that encompasses a number of issues specific to men's lives, such as men's and father's rights, family violence, sexuality, and war and trauma.

Men's studies is not to be confused with the pop culture concept of *meninist* or *meninism*. In the early 2000s, males used the term *meninist* to describe themselves as male feminists who support women's rights for equality. However, in the 2010s, the term morphed into a cause that is often in direct opposition to feminism. In short, *meninism* is a movement that focuses on a man's side of gender equality, or "men's rights," and is in direct opposition to feminism (Marthouse, 2015).

Men's studies is not to be confused with the number of men's movements seen in the 1980s and 1990s, such as Promise Keepers, National Center for Fathers, and the Alliance for Noncustodial Parents. It is instead a specific area of academic study that looks at the ways in which men are oppressed by their socialization and societal or cultural expectations. John Laughlin (2005), professor of men's studies at Akamai University, Hilo, Hawaii, suggests that men's studies programs are designed to equip students with "the capabilities needed to effectively manage the resulting changes in men's roles and

responsibilities.” Men’s studies combine theory and practice to effect social policy and to build a broad knowledge base in the study and research of both genders. In this manner, both women’s and men’s studies seek to better understand the ways in which gender affects both men’s and women’s individual and family experiences. Having a parallel body of academic work that examines issues specific to men affirms the idea that social, cultural, political, economic, educational, and family structures are equally important to both genders.

Today, no single portrait portrays the essence of “manhood” or “fatherhood,” because men and their roles in society and the family are multifaceted, complex, and everchanging. Because of the cultural evolution taking place in Western society, social and family scientists are now shifting their focus to men’s roles. Of particular interest to social science researchers and family practitioners is the role of fatherhood.

In the 1980s, research began to focus on the fact that men were playing more active roles in childrearing, as demonstrated by their ability, and willingness, to change their babies’ diapers. Since that time, empirical study in the roles and lives of fathers has been gaining momentum. For instance, contemporary studies are seeking to better understand the unique characteristics of fathers of various cultural and religious heritages (Novianti et al., 2023). They are also investigating different fathering styles in the wide array of family arrangements, such as single-parent fathers, fathers in two-parent homes, fathers who are men of color, and fathers who are gay (Cheng et al., 2022). Subsequent chapters in this textbook present information about social trends that affect the lives of men, such as questions pertaining to how much time fathers devote to their role as caregivers in these various family forms.

Researchers are also looking at how involved fathers are in the lives of their children. They are looking at whether the father’s role today is still utilitarian (useful, practical), or whether men are adopting women’s emotional/expressive roles to better accommodate the multiple roles of the working woman. How do factors such as age, occupation, education, and sexual orientation affect the experiences of fathering (Kim et al., 2023)? Of what significance is grandfathering in an individual’s lifespan? And the following is a question that remains unanswered in empirical study today is: How does the experience of fathering affect and influence the lives of men (Kotelchuck, 2022)?

Now that you have a knowledge base in the forms and functions of marriage and family and the basic concepts of family theory, it is necessary that you understand how you affect and are affected by the intimate relationships in your life. Next, we build on our knowledge base as we explore individual and family development.

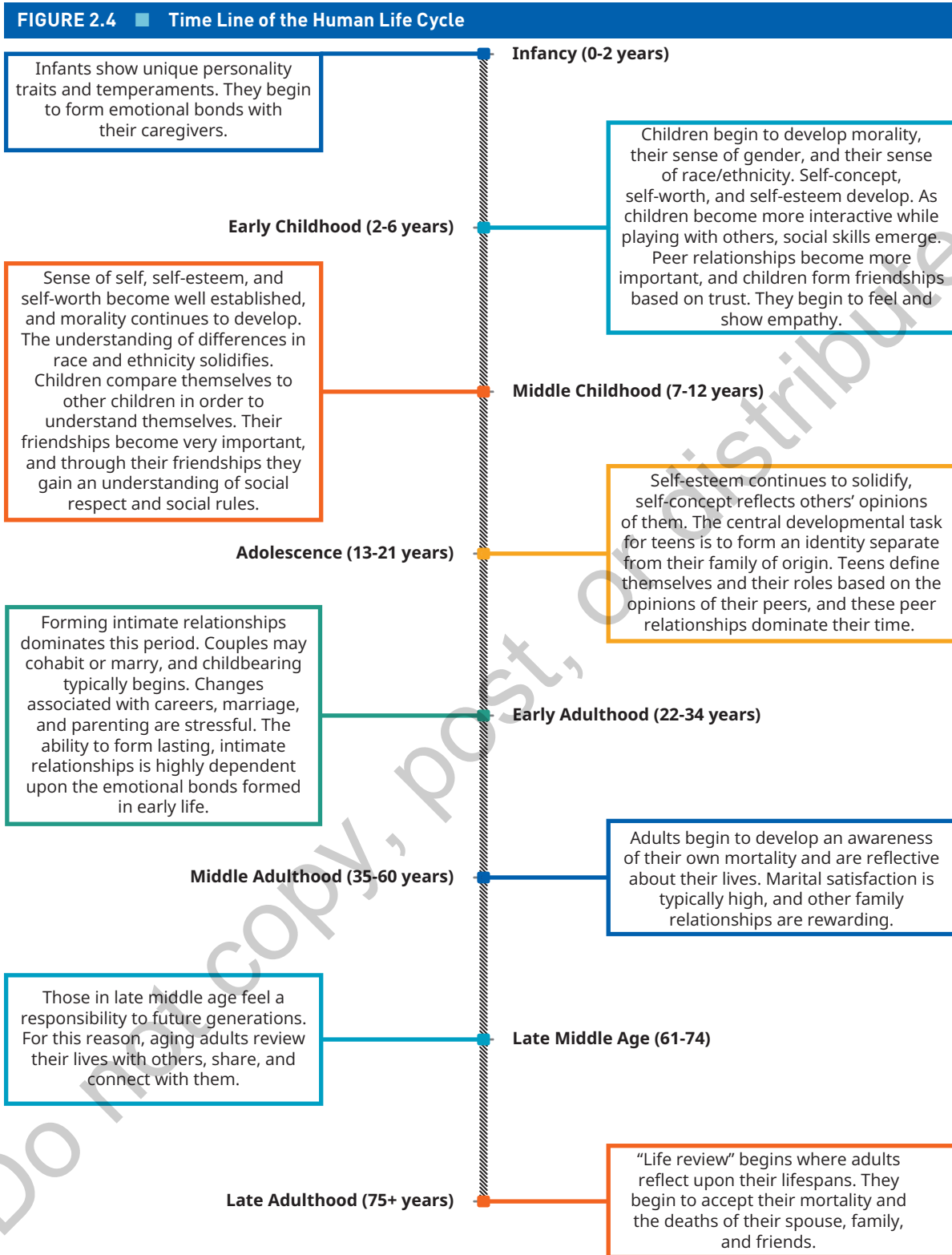
## FAMILY INTERACTIONS AND YOU

Each of us accomplishes many developmental milestones in our individual lifespan development, and we do so within the context of family living. Every phase of our individual development across our human life cycle intersects with the development of the family throughout its developmental cycle, ultimately shaping who we are as relational people. In this section, we take a close look at the human life cycle and the family life cycle.

### The Human Life Cycle

All human development is a complex, dynamic, and multifaceted process. As we grow and change, we accomplish what developmentalists, psychologists, and therapists term **developmental tasks**. These entail achieving certain biological, physical, cognitive/intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual tasks across the life course (see Figure 2.4). It is important to be aware of these developmental milestones because every point in our life cycle interconnects with the developmental stages of the family (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005). A son who becomes chronically ill during his college experience, for example, may disrupt a parent’s plans to retire early because of the added health expenses. Conversely, a dying parent might delay a student’s college experience because she feels she needs to be with her family through her parent’s illness.

The developmental tasks that most of us experience are considered to be **normative life events**—they come at relatively predictable points in our lives and are generally expected (Mcleod, 2023).



These events are often referred to as **on-time events** because of their relative predictability across the lifespan. For example, we expect an adolescent to undergo physical changes somewhere between 10 and 16 years of age. Along with these physical changes, we expect them to begin to desire more and more independence and freedom from their family of origin. Even though certain developmental tasks may be normative, they may nevertheless cause disruptions in the family's interactions. Additionally, sometimes events occur at atypical points in the lifespan, such as when a young adolescent gives birth. This is referred to as an **off-time event** because it does not take place at the more typical point in the person's life.

**Non-normative life events** are those that we do not anticipate, and that we cannot predict, but that do have an impact on our developmental life course (McLeod, 2023). It is not expected that both parents who are in the military will be called to serve in a war oceans away, for example, leaving the children to be reared by grandparents, aunts, uncles, or friends. We don't anticipate or expect that our son or daughter will have a severe reading disability. Nor do we expect that parents will lose their jobs or that a natural disaster such as fire or floods will destroy our homes. Whatever the situation or circumstance, the nuances of our individual development affect the family and its development.

Although human development is complex, it is important to gain a fundamental understanding of what developmental tasks take place over the life course. This allows us to grasp the significance of how the members of our family affect us and each other through each stage of our development. For our purposes of more fully understanding the intricacies of human relationships, our discussion focuses on the **psychosocial** (social and emotional) aspects of development. What follows is a brief synopsis, adapted in part from renowned and influential family life educators Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick (2005; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2023).

**Infancy (0–2 years).** From infancy to about 2 years of age, babies learn to walk, talk, and trust their caregivers. Every time a baby cries, the baby is sending out a signal of distress or need. Every time a caregiver responds to the baby's signals of distress or need and meets those needs with comfort and love, the baby learns that the world is a secure place and begins to form the foundation of trust that will be central—in fact crucial—to their future intimate relations.

**Early Childhood: The Play Years (2–6 years).** During this period of growth, children are eager and able to learn new skills—including social and emotional skills. In this phase, children begin to learn empathy and show concern for others' feelings; they will comfort someone who appears to be sad or in need. Children of this age begin to form relationships with peers, learn to obey rules, control their emotions, and delay the need for immediate gratification—all essential stepping stones to future, “grown-up” relationships.

**Middle Childhood: The School Years (7–12 years).** This phase of development brings with it a growth in moral development and what is termed by some researchers as *heart logic* (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005). As friendships become increasingly important, so does the importance of being able to express feelings and emotions in an appropriate fashion and of being able to respect the rights and needs of others. As children's capacity for empathy and understanding develops, so, too, does their tolerance for diversity, such as differences in gender, race, and ethnicity, unless parents and those in authority over them instruct them differently. During the school years, a child's sexual development and sexual identity also begin to intensify. All of these developmental leaps add to “who” the children will be someday in their intimate partnerships.

**Adolescence (13–21 years).** With rapid body changes, also comes an increase in adolescents' capacity for moral understanding; an increase in the understanding of self in relation to peers, family, and the community; and an increased awareness of their sexual identity (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005). As their ability to understand the world and relationships increases, adolescents become better equipped to tackle intimate social relationships.

**Early Adulthood (22–34 years).** As young adults, men and women during this developmental phase develop the ability—based on the relational foundations laid throughout all of infancy and childhood—to form and engage in emotionally mature intimate relationships. Throughout this phase of life, they continue to master their abilities to negotiate the complexities of marriage, family, and intimate relationships. At this phase, they learn to steer the course in interdependence, mutuality, and reciprocity in relationships and open themselves up to those they trust (see more about this in Chapter 5). At this juncture, they seek someone to share their lives with.

**Middle Adulthood (35–60 years).** Adults in their middle adulthood years are typically actively involved in raising and caring for their children. Adults look beyond themselves and focus their energies and attentions on the next generation and on others, such as their aging parents.

**Late Middle Age (60–74 years).** Although adults at this age deal with and manage declines in their physical and intellectual abilities, they begin to take steps to “pass the torch” to the next generation (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005). They feel a responsibility to future generations and will reach out in an attempt to make connections with them. My father, for example, a veteran of the Vietnam war,

faced and endured such difficulties during his year in combat that he never shared them with his family. As he nears the end of his own life course, he is beginning to share his experiences with his children and grandchildren; in doing so, he is connecting us to his past.

**Late Adulthood (75 and older).** Grief, loss, retrospection, and growth are the benchmarks of this developmental phase (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005). As adults age and start to think about the end of life, they begin to reflect on their lives and come to grips with the legacy they will leave to future generations. At the same time, they must accept the deaths of family and friends and their spouse or life partner—and they must accept the inevitability of their own mortality and death’s eventuality. Not only do they need to accept death and dying, but they must also accept the life that they lived.

As you can see, our early life experiences—from the moment of birth—have an impact on our development of our relational skills and abilities.

### The Family Life Cycle

What perhaps best distinguishes a family life education approach in the study of marriage, family, and intimate relations from other disciplines is the focus on and application of the family life cycle. Although some fields, such as psychology, sociology, and feminist studies, might disagree with the tenets of the family life cycle, Carter and McGoldrick perhaps best sum up the efficacy of its inclusion in the examination of family when they note, “We strongly believe that individual development takes place only in the context of significant emotional relationships and that most significant emotional relationships are family relationships, whether by blood, adoption, marriage, or commitment” (1999, p. 5).

There are experiences throughout our lives that establish a foundation for our ability to love and relate to others. Integral to these experiences is our family of origin. As you have learned throughout our study so far, we do not develop in isolation! Every phase of our development is affected by, intersected by, and overlapped with the developmental cycle of our family, and our family development is influenced by the multiple cultural contexts that surround it, as Bronfenbrenner’s model illustrated for us in Chapter 1. The **family life cycle** consists of multiple entrances and exits from the family of origin. For example, a young adult leaving for college is an exit, whereas the formation of a new family of origin as children marry is an entry. Families with young children experience multiple entries with their new family members, but families in later life experience multiple exits, such as when family members die. Along with the changes in the structure of the family come certain emotional transitions and related changes in the family status that are needed to move on developmentally.

This cycle of family growth and transition is depicted for us in Table 2.1. As you can see, in each stage, there are challenges in family life that cause us to develop or gain certain relational skills. Developing these skills helps us work through the changes associated with family life; at the same time, we develop relational skills we will someday carry into our own intimate relationships. Of course, few make these transitions seamlessly; sometimes families’ relationships are painfully stretched as they experience job loss or financial problems, severe illness, or the death of a loved one.

**TABLE 2.1** ■ The Family Life Cycle: Phases, Tasks, and Issues

Phase	Task	Issue
Pairing/Marriage	Fusion as couple	Leaving family of origin Readiness for intimacy Establishing goals, roles, values as new couple
Childbearing	Creation	Sharing each other with children Role ambiguity—wife, woman, mother?

Phase	Task	Issue
School-age children	Nurturing	Providing security (emotional and environmental) Learning how to parent Simultaneously spouse and parent Increasing parenting demands Increasing work demands
Family with adolescent children	Boundary testing	Control versus freedom Power struggle and rebellion Separation from family of origin Social and sexual exploration
Family as “launching ground”	Leaving/letting go	Changing roles of children still at home The empty nest—loss or opportunity? Parents rediscover each other Latent marital conflict may surface
Middle years	Reviewing/reappraising	Mid-life crisis? Fulfillment/disappointment Accepting limitations Changing self-image Death of parents Anticipating retirement
Aging	Facing mortality	Aging, illness, death Religion and philosophy Isolation/dependency Bereavement

Source: Adapted from Neighbour, R. H. (1985). The family life cycle. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 78(Suppl 8): 11–15. Reproduced by permission of the Royal Society of Medicine Press.

Throughout our study, we will examine a number of family processes (such as communication, gender roles, love, intimacy, and sexuality) and how they are developed over time within the family of origin. You will come to see that family development is, certainly, a multifaceted molding process as change occurs both inside and between family members. Whether you are a parent or child, brother or sister, bonded by blood or love, your experiences through the family life cycle affect who you are and who you become. Today, family life education and the family life cycle bring much to our understanding of contemporary family experiences and family living. As one family practitioner observes,

Families are dynamic groups that evolve and change as they develop. Each stage of the life cycle of a family entails a reorganization of family-relations and shared rules of life. . . . Moving from successive stages confronts families with new problems and this may give rise to a crisis. These difficulties for family members in evolving together are an important factor within the problems and symptoms that occur in families. The diversification of family structures doesn't undermine the relevance of the concept of family life cycle. As families are more fragile and changing, it has become useful to treat them as family trajectories and consider the stages of their evolution. (Dupont, 2018, p. 169)

It is important to note, however, that there are criticisms of the family life cycle. Specifically, the family life cycle has been criticized because it ignores the varying family constellations we discussed in Chapter 1 (such as families of color, gay/lesbian families, or intergenerational/extended families).

In short, any deviations or differences from a “traditional” family are ignored by the family life cycle. It also assumes that *all* families of origin share a common group identity, ignoring the fact that many today have departed from the previously common progression of family life. Finally, the model has been criticized because it is child-centric—it assumes that all families have children.

Prominent family life educators Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick address these inadequacies of the family life cycle in their book, *The Expanded Family Life Cycle* (2005). They note that today students of family and intimate life need to think about human development and the life cycle in a way that reflects society’s shifts to a more diverse and inclusive definition of the family. Without question, as Chapter 1 showed us, today there is no prototype of an American family.

## FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION: CREATING, IMPLEMENTING, AND EVALUATING EFFECTIVE FAMILY PROGRAMMING

Although we are a diverse people, we all have in common that we were born into or brought into a family, and each of us has experienced some degree of family life. But because of the enormous differences that exist in families today (Single-parent or two-parent? Absent father or present father? Divorced or married? Single-earner couple or dual-earner couple? Children or no children? Cohabiting or married? Same-sex partners/parents or heterosexual partners/parents?), the study of family presents difficult challenges to sociologists, family life practitioners, and researchers.

As a practicing family professional or family life educator, it is vitally important to be an effective consumer of the family studies literature: As you’ve seen in this chapter, knowing how to discern what we’re reading helps us to better provide for those individuals and families who seek our services because it removes us from our opinions and preconceived ideas to openly embrace differences and experiences not our own. Not only does understanding empirical research help us to be sensitive to varying diversity and community values and beliefs, it also helps us to employ a wide range of strategies to meet these unique needs (National Council on Family Relationships [NCFR], 2020). Particularly, family life educators are better equipped to create, implement, and evaluate effective, culturally competent, evidence-based programming.

The study of marriage, family, and intimate relationships is fascinating. By using a solid research methodology that provides researchers and consumers with reliable scholarship, we can look beyond our own family experiences, intuition, logic, and instinct to examine and understand the impact of our family members on our lives. By using the many theoretical frameworks provided by sociological and family studies, we have a lens through which we can view and better understand marriage and family relationships. By employing the practice of social science research and theoretical frameworks, we can explore, explain, and develop a far deeper understanding of family. In essence, we can “know” family and family life.

## SUMMARY

### Understanding Families Through Research

- Social science research uses the tools of scientific inquiry to examine human society and relationships (logic or common sense is not effective because everyone sees things differently based on different value systems, political beliefs, religious beliefs, etc.). Family research provides information that allows professionals to develop, implement, and evaluate programs that seek to enhance family life and family growth. Understanding the problems that face today’s family and finding explanations and answers to those problems would not be possible without the practice of social science inquiry through research.
- The scientific method is a process by which social science researchers formulate questions concerning social and individual phenomena and seek out answers. Using the scientific method, researchers design a process from start to finish that details the sequential, interrelated



investigative steps the researcher will follow. These steps include choosing the research topic; creating the research question and hypothesis; conceptualizing the research; using operational/empirical definitions; choosing a research method; selecting a population and sampling; collecting, processing, and analyzing the data; and, finally, applying research findings.

### **Becoming a Consumer of the Literature**

- In order to get the most out of research and learn how to distinguish well-written, valid research from poorly designed research that yields invalid or insignificant results, those interested in family and family life need to become consumers of social science literature by asking demanding questions of the literature.
- Because human subjects are the object of study, the practice of social science research is an endeavor that requires responsible conduct on the part of the researcher. To ensure the ethical treatment of research subjects, academic institutions and other research institutions establish research review committees, or IRBs.

### **Understanding Families Through Theory**

- Family theories allow us to move beyond our everyday, common beliefs about family and move toward an objective, scientific understanding of family and family process. Today, many theories exist that attempt to explain the workings of family, and each has made numerous contributions to the field of family studies, among them are Ecological theory, Family Development theory, Conflict theory, Family Systems theory, Symbolic Interaction theory, and Social Exchange theory.
- Considered the “grandfather of family theory,” Structural Functionalism (Talcott Parsons) maintains that gender-based role specialization is a necessary function in order to promote family (and hence, societal) equilibrium. Instrumental roles are assigned to the husband-father, and the wife-mother is assigned expressive roles.
- Structural Functionalism revolves around the idea that the family is organized and governed by unchangeable, fixed, irreversible role configurations. These gender-specific family functions operate in order to benefit the family itself as well as to promote the greater good of the society. Research suggests, however, that no substantial differences exist between lesbian and heterosexual parents in affective development or in areas of self-concept, happiness, and overall adjustment.
- Conflict theory states that competition for resources is built into every society and that the struggle for these resources leads to inequality and conflict. Because of these inequalities, some society members inherently have more power and control than others.
- Feminist theory centers on the experiences specific to women, views experiences from a woman’s vantage point, and advocates on behalf of women in an effort to understand and analyze the roles of marriage and family in perpetuating inequalities in the male-female relationships. Although there is no one feminist theory, there are a number of feminist perspectives that apply to sociological and family studies that help us better understand human behavior.
- The influence of feminist studies and significant cultural changes in the past three decades (and the resultant changes in roles and responsibilities for men) has created a need for specialized men’s studies. Men’s studies explore important areas of men’s lives, such as defining gender roles and shifting definitions of masculinity. Men’s studies also strive to generate theory specific to the study of masculinity, as well as to shun all forms of oppression—sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism.

### **Family Interactions and You**

- All human development is a complex, dynamic, and multifaceted process. During our life course, we accomplish developmental tasks, which include biological, physical, intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual growth.

- Most developmental tasks we experience are normative—coming at relatively predictable points in our lives. Non-normative life events are unanticipated and also affect our development.
- Understanding what psychosocial (social and emotional) developmental tasks take place over the life course allows family life educators to understand how members of a family affect each other through each stage of development.
- Because every phase of our development is integrated with the developmental cycle of our family, family practitioners use the family life cycle to study marriage, family, and intimate relationships.

## KEY TERMS

Case study	Observational research method
Conceptualization	Off-time event
Conflict theory	On-time events
Confounding (or rival) variables	Operational definitions
Construct	Population
Control group	Probability sample
Convenience sample	Psychosocial
Data churning	Qualitative research
Developmental tasks	Quantitative research
Ethics	Representativeness
Experimental design	Research
Experimental group	Research integrity
Expressive roles	Research question
Family life cycle	Response bias
Feminist theory	Response rate
Field research	Sample
Framework	Sample size
Hypotheses testing	Scientific method
Hypothesis	Social science research
Institutional Review Boards (IRBs)	Structural-Functionalist theory
Instrumental roles	Structures
Literature review	Survey
Men's studies	Theory
Non-normative life events	Validity
Nonprobability samples	Variable
Normative life events	