CHAPTER 11

Family

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Marriage and Family: Basic Institutions of Society

Recent decades have seen many changes in American family life. Birth rates have declined sharply, divorce and single-parent families are now common, and the majority of women with small children work in the paid labor force. In addition to these statistical trends, major shifts in attitudes and values have occurred. Homosexuality, premarital sex, and extramarital sex have all become more acceptable. Related to many of these changes are the dramatic changes in the roles of women in our society.

These changes in family life have been felt, either directly or indirectly, by all of us. Is the family a dying institution, or is it simply a changing one? In this chapter, we examine the question from the perspective of sociology. We begin with a broad description of marriage and the family as basic social institutions.

To place the changes in the U.S. family into perspective, it is useful to look at the variety of family forms across the world. What is it that is really essential about the family?

Universal Aspects

In every culture, the family has been assigned major responsibilities, typically including the following (Seccombe & Warner 2004):

- Replacing the population through reproduction
- Regulating sexual behavior
- Caring for dependents—children, the elderly, the ill, and the handicapped
- Socializing the young
- Providing intimacy, belongingness, and emotional support

Because these activities are important for individual development and the continuity of society, every society provides some institutionalized pattern for meeting them. No society leaves them to individual initiative. Although theoretically religious or educational institutions could handle these responsibilities, most societies have found it best to leave them to the family.

Unlike most social structures, the family can be a biological as well as a social group. The **family** is a group of persons linked by blood, adoption, marriage, or quasi-marital commitments. This definition is very broad; it would include a mother living alone with her child as well as a man living with several wives. The important criteria for families are that their members assume responsibility for each other and are bound together—if not by blood, then by some cultural markers such as marriage or adoption.

Marriage is an institutionalized social structure that is meant to provide an enduring framework for regulating sexual behavior and childbearing. Many cultures tolerate other kinds of sexual encounters—premarital, extramarital, or homosexual—but most cultures discourage childbearing outside marriage. In some cultures, the sanctions for nonmarital sexuality and childbearing are severe, but in others they are minimal.

Marriage is also a legal contract, specifying the obligations of each spouse. Until very recently, those obligations were sharply divided by sex: By law, husbands had an obligation to support their wives financially, and wives had an obligation to provide domestic and sexual services to their husbands. These sex-specific obligations only started changing with the rise of the modern feminist movement in the 1970s.

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Marriage is important for childbearing because it imposes socially sanctioned roles on parents and other relatives. When a child is born, parents, grandparents, and aunts and uncles are automatically assigned certain normative obligations to the child. This network represents a ready-made social structure designed to organize and stabilize the responsibility for children. Children born outside marriage, by contrast, are more vulnerable. The number of people normatively responsible for their care is smaller, and, even in the case of the mother, the norms are less well enforced. One consequence is higher infant mortality for children born outside of marriage in almost all societies, including our own.

Marriage and family are among the most basic and enduring patterns of social relationships. Although blood ties are important, the family is best understood as a social structure defined and enforced by cultural norms.

Cross-Cultural Variations

Families universally are expected to regulate sexual behavior, care for dependents, socialize the young, and offer emotional and financial security. The importance of these tasks, however, varies across societies. Offering economic security is more important in societies without government-provided social services; regulating sexual behavior is more important in cultures without contraception. In our own society, we have seen the priorities assigned to these family responsibilities change substantially over time. In colonial America, economic responsibility and replacement through reproduction were the family's primary functions; the provision of emotional support was a secondary consideration. More recently, however, some of the responsibility for socializing the young has been transferred to schools and day-care centers; financial responsibility for dependent elderly persons has been partially shifted to the government. At the same time, intimacy has taken on increased importance as a dimension of marital relationships.

Although all families share the same basic functions, hundreds of different family forms can satisfy these needs. This section reviews some of the most important ways cultures have fulfilled family functions.

Family Patterns

Throughout history and across cultures, people have typically lived with an assortment of relatives: a husband and one or more wives; their children; and one or more grandparents, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, or cousins. This type of family is known as an **extended family**. Extended families have many benefits: There is always someone to hug or to talk with, finding a babysitter is easy, elderly and disabled relatives need not be left alone, and expenses can be shared. In the United States, extended families are particularly common among immigrants, who consider caring for elderly and needy family members both normal and morally required.

Most Americans, however, expect to live in a **nuclear family**. A nuclear family consists of a mother and father and their children. Nuclear families are valued by those who want their independence and who do *not* want parents or in-laws looking over their shoulders.

In reality, less than one-third of U.S. families are nuclear families (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2009d). Moreover, when we look at all U.S. households (rather than just at families), we find that only 22 percent consist of married couples with their own children. Instead, most adults live either alone, with friends or lovers, with children but not a partner, or with relatives. Map 11.1 shows the distribution of nuclear families across the United States.

An **extended family** is a family in which a couple and their children live with other relatives, such as the wife's or husband's parents or siblings.

A **nuclear family** is a family in which a couple and their children form an independent household living apart from other relatives.

A growing family pattern in the United States is the blended family. A **blended family** is one that includes children born to one parent as well as children born to both parents. Imagine, for example, a marriage between Jim and Jane. Now imagine that Jim has two children from a previous marriage, Jane has one from her first marriage and one from her second marriage, and Jim and Jane together have another child. All of these people belong to one blended family. In addition, each of these children may interact occasionally with Jim and Jane's former spouses and with any other children that those spouses now have.

More recently, the rise in gay and lesbian families has raised further questions about the nature and meaning of family. This topic is explored further in Focus on American Diversity: Gay and Lesbian Families.

A **blended family** includes children born to one parent as well as children born to both parents.

Monogamy is a marriage in which there is only one wife and one husband.

Polygamy is any form of marriage in which a person may have more than one spouse at a time.

Marriage Patterns

In the United States and much of the Western world, a marriage form called **monogamy** is practiced; each man may have only one wife at a time, and each woman may have only one husband at a time. Many cultures, however, practice some form of **polygamy**—marriage in which a person may have more than one spouse at a time. Most often, cultures allow men to have more than one wife, but a small percentage of cultures allow women to have more than one husband.

Even in cultures that allow—or even promote—polygamy, it has limits: Since there are nearly equal numbers of men and women in society, if some men

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Gay and Lesbian Families

What does it mean to be a family? As we have seen, a family is a group of persons linked by blood, adoption, marriage, or quasi-marital commitments. By this definition, two men or two women who commit to each other, live together, and, if they have children, parent them together are a family.

Of course, gay or lesbian couples cannot biologically have children together through sexual intercourse. But the same is true of some heterosexual married couples, who also must rely on reproductive technologies or adoption if they want children. Similarly, many lesbians and gay men have children using artificial insemination or the like, and others have children from previous heterosexual relationships whom they raise together.

Issues related to gay families have become matters of fierce public debate in recent years. Should gays be allowed to adopt children? Is a gay man or lesbian inherently unfit for child custody or visitation rights? Should lesbians be allowed to use artificial insemination? Should gays and lesbians be allowed to marry so their partners can share their health insurance and Social Security benefits?

These are questions that go to the heart of the family. The traditional view is that homosexual unions are both unnatural and sinful. Others define the family by long-term commitment, and they are willing to tolerate or even encourage a variety of family forms—including gay and lesbian families—as long as they contribute to stable and nurturing environments for adults and children. In fact, research consistently finds that growing up with gay or lesbian parents has no measurable effect, other than perhaps increasing children's acceptance of nontraditional gender behavior (Stacey & Biblarz 2001).

There is no question that both homosexual activity and gay marriage are regarded more favorably now than in the past. A national survey conducted in 2009 found that 42 percent of Americans approve of gay marriages—up from only 22 percent a mere five years earlier—and another 25 percent believe they should be able to form civil unions (New York Times 2009). Despite this growing support, however, few American lesbians and gays have the option of marrying their partners. Only a small number of U.S. jurisdictions allow same-sex couples to register their unions as "domestic partnerships," and even fewer permit same-sex marriages. Moreover, the federal Defense of Marriage Act prohibits any federal recognition of gay marriage. In contrast, a small number of other countries, including Canada, Spain, and South Africa, now recognize same-sex marriage. The question American society must now address is whether gay families should receive the same legal recognition and protection as other families in this country and as gay families in some other nations.

(typically the wealthiest and most powerful) have more than one wife, other men have to do without. Consequently, even in societies where polygamy is accepted, most people actually practice monogamy, and young men may have to go elsewhere to find any wife at all. For example, in recent years hundreds of teenage boys have been banished from U.S. towns controlled by the polygamous Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. (The mainstream Church of Latter Day Saints—commonly known as Mormons—rejected polygamy more than a century ago.) Officially, these boys were banished because of misbehavior. Investigative reporters, however, argue that they were banished because they posed a threat to older men who wanted to take additional, young wives (Krakauer 2003; Eckholm 2007).

As this suggests, polygamy can only exist in societies where men have more power than women and where some men have considerably more power than do other men.

The U.S. Family over the Life Course

Family relationships play an important role in every stage of our lives. As we consider our lives from birth to death, we tend to think of ourselves in family roles. Being a youngster usually means growing up in a family; being an adult usually means having a family; being elderly often means being a grandparent.

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The type of family you grew up in likely had a significant effect on your experiences and your future opportunities. If you grew up in a nuclear family, you only needed to share family resources (money, time, food, support for college) with a limited number of people. If you grew up in an extended family, you had to share resources with more people, but may have benefited from having other adults or older kids to care for you. If you grew up in a blended family, or were raised by a single parent or by grandparents, it's more likely that resources were spread thin and that you will need to work harder to support yourself through college.

AP Wide World Photos

Some modern American families, like these fundamentalist Mormons, live a polygamous life despite legal and social opposition from most of their fellow citizens and from most other Mormons.

Because of the close tie between family roles and individual development, we have organized this description of the U.S. family into a life course perspective. This means that we will approach the family by looking at age-related transitions in family roles.

Childhood

U.S. norms specify that childhood should be a sheltered time. Children's only responsibilities are to accomplish developmental tasks such as learning independence and self-control and mastering the school curriculum. Norms also specify that children should be protected from labor, physical abuse, and the cruder, more unpleasant aspects of life.

Childhood, however, is seldom the oasis that our norms specify. A sizable number of children are physically or emotionally abused by their parents. For example, about 10 percent of girls experience rape or attempted rape during childhood (Tjaden & Thoennes 1998). In addition, nearly one-fifth of all American children grow up in poverty—more than in any other Western nation except Russia (Heuveline & Weinshenker 2008).

An important change in the social structure of the child's world is the sharp increase in the proportion of children who grow up in single-parent households: 28 percent of children are now born to single mothers (Childstats.gov 2009). Many more experience the divorce of their parents and sometimes a second divorce between their parents and stepparents (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine 2000). Perhaps because single parents cannot provide as much money or time as married parents, studies show that, on average, children whose parents divorce have poorer self-esteem, academic performance, and social relationships than other children. These differences are slight, however, and stem primarily not from the divorce itself but from the poverty and parental conflicts that precede or follow it (Coontz 1997; Demo & Cox 2000; Lamanna & Riedmann 2000). Consequently, some of these children would not have been any better off if their parents had remained married.

As increasing numbers of U.S. women, including those with infants younger than age 1, have entered the labor force, day-care centers have become much more important aspects of early childhood socialization.

The increasing participation of women in the labor force has added another social structure to the experience of young children: day care. In 2007, about two-thirds of mothers of children younger than age 6 held jobs outside the home (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2009a). About one-third of preschool children with an employed mother attend a day-care center (Smolensky & Gootman 2003).

Research mostly supports the use of day-care centers. Some research suggests that day care can increase children's stress levels and behavioral problems, but the effect is not large (Belsky et al. 2007; Watamura et al. 2003). Other research suggests that day care increases children's math and reading skills and that any negative effects of child care are limited to certain types of children, families, or programs (Love et al. 2003). High-quality programs, which are most often attended by more affluent children, offer especially strong benefits (Kirp 2007). However, because lower-income children come from homes where they are less likely to get intellectual and social stimulation, they benefit considerably from day care, even in lower-quality programs. At any rate, many families cannot afford to have a parent stay home with the children. For these families, day care is far superior to leaving young children alone or in the care of older siblings.

Adolescence

Contemporary social structures make adolescence a difficult period. Because society has little need for the contributions of youth, it encourages young people to become preoccupied with trivial matters—such as eyebrow shaping or loading iPods. Yet, because adolescence is a temporary state, the adolescent is under constant pressure. Questions such as "What are you going to do when you finish school?", "What are you going to major in?", "What went wrong in Friday night's game?", and "How serious are you about that boy [girl]?" can create strain. That strain can be particularly high for gay and lesbian youth, who may find themselves interested in someone of the "wrong" sex, confused about their own feelings, and fearful over how their families might react.

Adolescents are supposed to become independent from their parents, acquiring adult skills and their own values. They are supposed to shift from the family to peer groups as a source of self-esteem. They are supposed to be interested in the opposite sex, but their parents expect this interest to be asexual while their friends may have a very different view. They also must learn how to interact with a broader range of people, and, last but not least, they are supposed to have fun (Gullotta, Adams, & Markstrom 2000). Thus, although society does not appear to expect much from them, adolescents experience a great deal of role strain. Many adults believe adolescence was the worst rather than the best time of their lives.

The Transition to Adulthood

Some societies have **rites of passage**, formal rituals that mark the end of one age status and the beginning of another. In our own society, there is no clear point at which we can say a person has become an adult. However, in the United States adulthood usually means that a person has a job, a place to live other than his or her parents' home, and enough money to support his or her children. Some of these norms are optional, and people may be considered adults who never marry or, in the case of women, hold a paid job. Nevertheless, the exit from adolescence always entails "escaping" from dependence on parents and family.

Making this escape, however, has become a harder and longer process (Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut 2006). In 1960, more than 80 percent of 30-year-olds (male and female) had left home, finished school, and achieved financial independence. By 2000, the numbers who had done so had dropped to about 70 percent—not a huge drop, but still significant when compared with historical patterns (Furstenberg et al. 2004). With the current economic crisis, significant numbers of young—and not-so-young—people have been forced to move back in with their parents: As of 2008, 17 percent of 25- to 29-year-olds were living with their parents (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2009d).

Why has the transition to adulthood slowed down? First, changing attitudes have allowed women (and thus men) to extend their schooling and delay marriage and parenthood. Second, economic factors have made it hard for many young people to strike out on their own. The cost of living rose rapidly from the 1960s through 2007, and paychecks did not keep pace. Prices have since fallen (along with the economy), but getting a job has become much more difficult. In addition, young people now graduate with more educational debts than was the case a generation ago.

Because of these economic and cultural changes, many young adults continue to live with their parents after leaving school, sometimes leaving home and returning several times before becoming independent. Some live with their parents to make ends meet, some to afford nice cars, cable television, fun vacations, and fast computers. Others can live on their own only because they receive substantial subsidies from their parents; about one-third of young Americans between 18 and 34 receive such subsidies annually (Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut 2006).

Early Adulthood

Most Americans marry at least once. This strong cultural emphasis on marriage is one of the reasons that so many gays and lesbians want to marry their life partners. Thus one of the key issues in early adulthood is deciding whether and whom to marry.

Rites of passage are formal rituals that mark the end of one age status and the beginning of another.

At first glance, it appears as if all persons are on their own in the search for a suitable spouse; few Americans (outside of certain religious and ethnic communities) rely on matchmakers or arranged marriages. On further reflection, however, it is clear that parents, schools, and churches all try to help young people find suitable partners. Schools hold dances designed to encourage heterosexual relationships, churches have youth groups partly to encourage members to date and marry within their church, parents and friends introduce somebody "we'd like you to meet." Although seeking a marriage partner may be fun, it is also a normative, almost obligatory, social behavior.

Seeking Sexual and Romantic Relationships

In the 1950s, young adults dated in order to find a spouse. Many did so very quickly, and more than 50 percent of U.S. women married before their twenty-first birthday. Times have changed considerably, especially for those who are college educated, live in urban areas, and are not very religious. Nowadays most young people rarely even talk about dates, let alone about finding someone to settle down with. Instead, most prefer to hang out with groups of friends, to "hook up" now and then, and perhaps to find a more serious boyfriend/girlfriend relationship eventually.

By their late twenties, 40 percent of women and 30 percent of men still have never married. Some of them are not interested in marrying, but most are looking for at least a temporary partner. Thus many people continue to seek sexual or romantic relationships into their thirties and later, even if they feel ambivalent about marriage. (This ambivalence is reflected in the growing tradition of bachelorette parties, a topic discussed in Focus on Media and Culture: Understanding Bachelorette Parties on the next page.)

Sorting through the Marriage Market

Over the course of one's single life, one probably meets thousands of potential marriage partners. How do we narrow down the marital field?

Obviously, you are unlikely to meet, much less marry, someone who lives in another community or another state. In the initial stage of attraction, **propinquity**, or spatial nearness, operates in this and a much more subtle fashion, by increasing the opportunity for continued interaction. It is no accident that so many people end up marrying fellow workers or students. The more you interact with others, the more positive your attitudes toward them become—and positive attitudes may ripen into love.

Spatial closeness is also often a sign of similarity. People with common interests and values tend to find themselves in similar places, and research indicates that we are drawn to others like ourselves. Of course, there are exceptions, but faced with a wide range of choices, most people choose a mate who is like them in many ways (Kalmijn 1998). Most marry within their social class, and most also marry within their racial, ethnic, or religious group. Marrying someone who is *similar* to you is called **homogamy**. Marrying *within* one's group—however the group is defined—is called **endogamy**. These two concepts, of course, overlap, since someone from within your group is likely to be somewhat similar to you.

Conversely, marrying someone who is *different* from you is called **heterogamy**, and marrying *outside* one's group is called **exogamy** (or *intermarriage*, in everyday language). Intermarriages can only occur when individuals have contact with persons from other groups and accept those others as more or less equal. Intermarriage is more likely among those with more education: Higher education both brings individuals into contact with others of different backgrounds and exposes individuals to more liberal ideas about whom one could or should marry (Qian & Lichter 2007).

Physical attractiveness may not be as important as advertisers have made it out to be, but studies do show that appearance is important in gaining initial attention (Sullivan 2001). Its importance normally recedes after the first meeting.

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Your college education is likely to affect whom you marry. Many people find a spouse in college classrooms or activities (based on propinquity). If you attend a college linked to your religion, race, or ethnic group, you are more likely to marry within your group (endogamy). If college throws you into contact with many others whose backgrounds are different from your own, you will be more likely to marry someone from a different background.

Propinquity is spatial nearness.

Homogamy is the tendency to choose a mate similar in status to oneself.

Endogamy is the practice of choosing a mate from within one's own racial, ethnic, or religious group.

Heterogamy means choosing a mate who is *different* from oneself.

Exogamy means choosing a mate from *outside* one's own racial, ethnic, or religious group.

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Understanding Bachelorette Parties

A generation ago, most brides-to-be celebrated their upcoming marriages with wedding showers. At these showers, female friends and relatives brought the future bride pots, pans, linens, and the occasional item of lingerie; played humorous games centered on being a wife and mother; and enjoyed light refreshments. These days, many white, middle-class brides (as well as a growing number of others) also celebrate their upcoming weddings at bachelorette parties.

Bachelorette parties are characterized by three things: bonding with female friends, heavy drinking, and a sexualized atmosphere (Montemurro 2006). At a typical party, the bride-to-be spends the night with her female friends, drinking vodka martinis with names like *Sex on the Beach*, watching a male stripper or even getting a lap dance, and playing games that require the bride to do things like kissing male strangers or biting the labels off their briefs.

How did we go from pots, pans, and afternoon tea to lap dances? According to sociologist Beth Montemurro (2006), bachelorette parties reflect the great shifts in women's lives and in cultural attitudes toward gender. First, bachelorette parties celebrate the importance of female friendship, in contrast to earlier norms that expected women to gratefully leave behind their female friends for a man's love. Second, bachelorette parties signal that brides-to-be have sexual desires and have been sexually active—a major change from earlier ideas about women's sexuality. Finally, the parties signal a defiant belief in gender equality and, specifically, in the idea that women should be free to lead lives independent of their husbands. As one young woman explained when asked why women started having bachelorette parties:

> I think we started it because men always have their bachelor parties … and all we had was a bridal shower, getting stuff for the home. And you never hear of them having a "man shower" where they get hammers and tools … It seemed like theirs was something more about sex and drinking and partying. And it's not fair for the women to miss out on that. (Montemurro 2006, 125)

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At the same time, although bachelorette parties are designed partly to celebrate female sexuality, they also signal that the bride-to-be is about to leave her sexual freedom behind. Similarly, the parties celebrate female friendship but also carry a tone of rue-fulness when the participants recognize that those friendships will likely weaken after marriage. Finally, the parties celebrate gender equality and female freedom, but also signal in various ways that the bride-to-be will soon lose some of her control over her life.

In sum, bachelorette parties signal modern women's ambivalence about marriage: Although the women Montemurro interviewed were happy to trade sexual freedom for marriage, they also regretted the losses that they knew marriage would bring. Bachelorette parties serve as a new cultural rite of passage that helps women acknowledge and cope with this ambivalence.

Initial interest is likely to progress toward a more serious relationship if the individuals discover similar interests, aspirations, anxieties, and values (Kalmijn 1998; Seccombe & Warner 2004). When relationships start to get serious, couples begin checking to see if they share values such as the desire for children or commitment to an equal division of household labor. If he wants her to do all the housework and she thinks that idea went out with the hula hoop, they will probably back away from marriage.

Responding to Narrow Marriage Markets

Whether an individual ends up marrying also depends on the local supply of "economically attractive" partners. As early as 1987, William Julius Wilson noted that one of the reasons African American women were much less likely to marry than white women was the shrinking pool of African American men with good educations and jobs. Results from other researchers reinforce this conclusion: A shortage of males employed in good jobs with adequate earnings sharply reduces the likelihood that a woman will marry or even live with a man outside of marriage (Lichter et al. 1992; Raley 1996; Teachman, Tedrow, & Crowder 2000). In fact, differences in the availability of marriageable men account for at least 40 percent of the racial difference in overall marriage rates.

Local marriage markets also affect rates of intermarriage: Minority group members are significantly less likely to intermarry if they can easily find a marriage partner from within their group. So, for example, because of recent immigration from Asia, Asian Americans are now *less* likely to marry non-Asians than they were a decade ago (Qian & Lichter 2007).

As Figure 11.1 shows, Native Americans and Asian Americans are the most likely to marry outside their group (Qian & Lichter 2007). Largely because of gender stereotypes, Asian American women (who are often stereotyped as hyperfeminine) are more likely than Asian American men to find non-Asian spouses (usually white). Similarly, African American men (who are often stereotyped as hypermasculine) are more likely than African American women to find spouses (usually white) from outside their group.

In an interesting sidebar, researchers have found that "economically attractive" women are also more likely to marry. Their greater attractiveness to potential male partners apparently more than makes up for the fact that women with full-time employment and higher earnings tend to be choosier about the men they date and marry (Lichter et al. 1992).

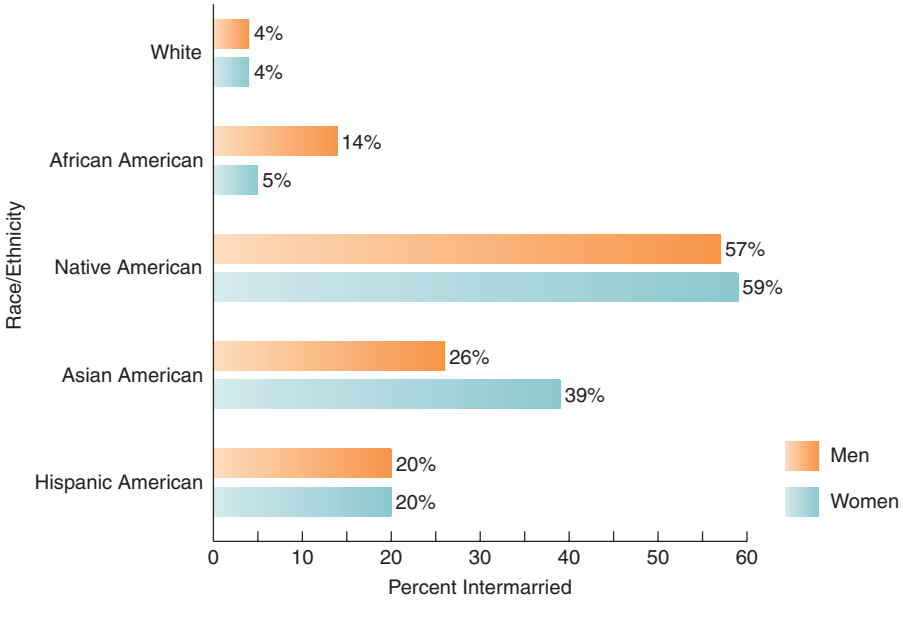

FIGURE 11.1 Intermarriage among Persons Born in the United States Native Americans are more likely than other groups to marry outside of their group (that is to engage in *exogamy*). Exogamy is higher among Asian American women than among Asian American men, and higher among African American men than among African American women.

SOURCE: Qian & Lichter (2007).

Intermarriage has become more common over time, especially between white men and Asian American women.

Middle Age

The busiest part of most adult lives is the time between the ages of 20 and 45. There are often children in the home and marriages and careers to be established. This period of life is frequently marked by role overload simply because so much is going on at one time. Middle age, that period roughly between 45 and 65, is by contrast often a quieter time. Studies show that both men and women tend to greet the empty nest with relief rather than regret (Umberson et al. 2005).

For a growing number of middle-aged couples, however, the nest is far from empty. First, immigrant families often believe that it is proper for adult children to live at home until marriage and for elderly parents to live with their middle-aged children. In these situations, the extended family is accepted and an empty nest may just seem lonely. Second, because of increased life expectancy, many native-born, middle-aged people now find themselves providing care for one or more of their parents. Third, middle-aged people are now more likely to have adult children at home because it has become more difficult for young people to establish themselves financially. Similarly, when young people divorce they are sometimes forced by finances to move back home. Not surprisingly, marital happiness is lower for parents whose adult children live with them (Umberson et al. 2005).

Sadly, the reverse situation—middle-aged adults forced to move in with their adult children—has also grown more common, as increasing numbers of middle-aged people have lost their homes to foreclosures.

Age 65 and Beyond

One of the most important changes in the social structure of old age is that it is now a common stage in the life course—and often a long one. Almost all of us can count on living to age 65. Furthermore, if you live to age 65, you can expect to live an average of 18.7 more years (National Center for Health Statistics 2009). Most of these years will be healthy ones (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging Related Statistics 2008).

Family roles continue to be critical in old age. Having spouses, children, grandchildren, and brothers and sisters all contribute to well-being. Marriage is an especially important relationship, one that provides higher income, live-in help, and companionship. Because of men's shorter life expectancy and their tendency to marry younger women, however, marriage is not equally available: 78 percent of men aged 65 to 74 are still married compared with only 57 percent of women that age.

Whether older people are married or not, relationships with children and grandchildren are typically an important factor in their lives. Most grandparents visit grandchildren every month and report very good relationships with them (American Association of Retired Persons 1999). Many children and families would have great difficulty without the help of grandparents, and many grandparents consider

As people move into the "oldest old" group, most come to rely heavily on their daughters for assistance. This can create considerable strain when the daughters find themselves simultaneously responsible for their parents and their children.

involvement with their grandchildren an important source of personal satisfaction (Allen, Blieszner, & Roberto 2000).

Grandparents are especially important when grandchildren are left parentless or effectively parentless, due to illness, disability, imprisonment, or substance abuse. Currently 1.5 million children live with grandparents rather than with parents (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2009d). These "skipped generation" households of grandparents and grandchildren are sharply at risk for poverty (Newman & Massengill 2006). Usually, though, the alternative is worse: sending the children to foster care, a system rife with problems.

The nature of intergenerational relationships depends substantially on the ages of the generations. When the older generation falls into the "young old" category, they are generally still providing more help to their children than their children are providing to them (Hogan, Eggebeen, & Clogg 1993). They are helping with down payments and grandchildren's college educations or providing temporary living space for adult children who have divorced or lost their jobs.

As the senior generation moves into the "old old" category, however, relationships must be renegotiated (Mutran & Reitzes 1984). Even in the "old old" category, most people continue to be largely self-sufficient, but they eventually will need help of some kind—for shopping, home repairs, and social support. Although these services are available from community agencies, most older people rely heavily on their families, especially their daughters (Kemper 1992; Lye 1996). Understandably, though, both older people and their adult children are happiest when these relationships are free of dependency. Elderly persons much prefer to live alone rather than with their children (Bayer & Harper 2000).

Roles and Relationships in Marriage

Marriage is one of the major role transitions to adulthood, and most people marry at least once. In fiction, the story ends with the wedding, and we are told that the couple lived happily ever after. In real life, though, the work has just begun. Marriage means

the acquisition of a whole new set of duties and responsibilities, as well as a few rights. What are they and what is marriage like?

Gender Roles in Marriage

Marriage is a sharply gendered relationship. Both normatively and in actual practice, husbands and wives and mothers and fathers have different responsibilities. Although many things have changed, U.S. norms specify that the husband *ought* to work outside the home; it is still considered his responsibility to be the primary provider for his family—even though in about one-fourth of dual-earner households, wives outearn their husbands (Winkler, McBride, & Andrews 2005). Similarly, although most Americans now believe that husbands and wives should share in household labor, most still expect that the wife will do the larger share. In fact, women currently perform about two-thirds of household labor (Amato et al. 2007). Interestingly, although husbands are happier when they do *less* housework, and wives are happier when their husbands do *more* housework, the odds that *both* husband and wife will be happy with their marriage is greatest when they evenly *split* the housework (Amato et al. 2007).

Although women who work outside the home typically do less housework than other women, this still leaves many working women (especially those with young children) subject to severe cases of role overload, or role strain. One adaptation women make to this overload is to lower their standards for cleanliness, meals, and other domestic services. They let their family eat at McDonald's and let the iron gather dust.

Another adaptation women make is to hire other women to perform domestic tasks. In this way, domestic labor remains a woman's job, and the idea that women are responsible for this work is reinforced. In addition, since most employers of domestic help are white and middle class and most domestic workers are nonwhite and working class, paid domestic labor also reinforces class and race divisions within society (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Parreñas 2000).

The Parental Role: A Leap of Faith

The decision to become a parent is a momentous one. Children are extremely costly, both financially and in terms of emotional wear and tear—and the costs can continue for decades. It currently costs about $191,000 to raise a child to age 17, and another $42,000 by the time the child reaches age 34 (Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut 2006).

Parenthood is really the biggest risk most people will ever take. Few other undertakings require such a large commitment on so uncertain a return. The list of disadvantages is long and certain: It costs a lot of money, takes an enormous amount of time, disrupts usual activities, and causes at least occasional stress and worry. Also, once you've started, there is no backing out; it is a lifetime commitment. What are the returns? You hope for love and a sense of family, but you know all around you are parents whose children cause them heartaches and headaches. In fact, the presence of children in the home—especially infants and teenagers—seems particularly likely to reduce marital happiness, and happiness decreases with each additional child (Twenge, Campbell, & Foster 2003). Yet despite all this, most people want and have children.

Mothering versus Fathering

Despite some major changes, the parenting roles assumed by men and women still differ considerably (Cancian & Oliker 2000). Mothers are the ones most likely to drop

out of the labor force to care for infants and young children; they are the ones most likely to care for sick children and to go to school conferences (Cancian & Oliker 2000). Fathers, on the other hand, are the ones likely to carry the major burden of providing for their families.

The overwhelming proportion of mothers who are employed—around 80 percent—has exerted pressure for fathers to increase their role in child care. Although research still finds that fathers "help" rather than "take responsibility," and that they are more likely to play with children than to change diapers, fathers have increased their role in child care. A growing proportion of fathers, however, do not live with their children. Among these fathers, contact tends to be low and child care virtually nonexistent.

Stepparenting

Because the U.S. Census collects only limited information on the topic, it is unclear how many U.S. children currently live with a stepparent. Researchers, however, estimate that about one-third will do so before they are 18—most often with a mother and a stepfather (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine 2000). If parenting is difficult, stepparenting is more so (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine 2000). Often stepparents are unsure what role they should take in their stepchildren's lives, and often their spouses and stepchildren are equally ambivalent. Older children, especially, are likely to reject stepparents and to discourage warm relationships, although many eventually develop close relationships with their stepparents. Stepmothers typically face more difficulties than stepfathers because stepmothers typically are more involved in their stepchildren's lives. In addition, stepmothers face more competition for the children's affections, since biological mothers are far more likely to remain involved in their children's lives than are biological fathers.

© Peter Beck/Corbis

Although fathers now take more responsibility for child care and household tasks than they did in previous generations, mothers still bear far more of these burdens, leaving many feeling overworked and underappreciated.

Contemporary Family Choices

As discussed in Chapter 2, U.S. norms have changed over time to permit much wider variation in the way that people achieve core values. Although a happy family life remains a central goal for almost all Americans, the ways individuals meet this goal have changed considerably. Increasingly, individuals actively choose whether to marry or just live together, whether to have children (within or outside of marriage), and whether to make work or family their top priority.

Marriage or Cohabitation

Cohabitation means living with a romantic/sexual partner without marrying him or her. During the last 30 years, the chances that an individual will *ever* engage in cohabitation has increased more than 400 percent for men and 1,200 percent for women. Cohabitation is also an increasingly common stage in moving toward marriage: Approximately half of all recently married couples cohabited beforehand (Smock 2000).

But cohabitation is not always a prelude to marriage: Much of the decline in U.S. marriage rates is due to the increasing numbers of individuals who cohabit *instead of* marrying. The proportion of cohabiting couples that married within 3 years declined

Cohabitation means living with a romantic/sexual partner outside of marriage.

by half between the 1970s and the 1990s, and 40 percent of unmarried women who give birth these days are in cohabiting couples (Cherlin 2004). Indeed, Andrew Cherlin, a leading sociologist of the family, argues that we are now witnessing the **deinstitutionalization of marriage**: the gradual disintegration of the social norms regarding the need for marriage and the meaning of marriage. This process has gained ground as cohabiting couples have won legal rights (such as the right to pass on property to each other or to sue for spousal maintenance if they split up). Conversely, the fight for (and against) gay marriage suggests that marriage still means a great deal to most Americans.

Having Children ... or Not

Although most people in the United States plan to have children, increasingly they choose to do so outside of marriage. Others will choose to postpone parenthood, and increasing numbers will choose to remain childless. Still others will conclude that the best way to add children to their family is through adoption.

Nonmarital Births

Almost 40 percent of all births in the United States are to unmarried women. Most of these births (about three-fourths) are to women 20 years of age and older (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura 2009). Now that most women participate in the labor force, many believe that they have the economic and psychological resources to tackle the tough job of parenting on their own. Some will decide against abortion if they become pregnant accidentally, and others will intentionally become pregnant or adopt even if they are not married (Hertz 2006). For the same reasons, births to unmarried women also have increased in Europe (Figure 11.2).

Nonmarital childbearing among teenagers raises special concern. The rate of teen childbearing declined steadily and considerably from 1991 to 2005, but has risen slightly since then and is higher than in any other industrialized nation (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura 2009). Because teenage mothers are less likely to complete college or even high school, they are also likely to suffer economic hardship. In many instances, however, teenage pregnancy stems from poverty as well as causing it (Luker 1996; Newman & Massengill 2006; Edin & Kefalas 2006). Girls who face bleak futures sometimes conclude that single motherhood is a reasonable way to seek love and happiness. Other girls become pregnant because they fear that using contraceptives would suggest to a new boyfriend that they are "easy." Still others lack the power to insist that contraception be used.

Having a child outside of marriage, however, does not have to either cause or exacerbate poverty. In Europe, increasing numbers of women are having children outside marriage, but neither the women nor the children fall into poverty as a result. Decoding the Data: Poverty and Single Motherhood explores this apparent paradox.

Nor does having a child outside marriage necessarily mean raising a child alone. About 40 percent of nonmarital childbirths in the United States are to women who live with the fathers of their babies (Smock 2000). Many of these women will eventually marry the father or another man; others will continue to share parenting outside of marriage.

The **deinstitutionalization of marriage** is the gradual disintegration of the social norms that undergird the need for marriage, the meaning of marriage, and expectations regarding marital roles.

Delayed Childbearing

Many married women are choosing to postpone childbearing until 5 or even 10 years after their first marriages. Today, 28 percent of U.S. women aged 30 to 34 are still

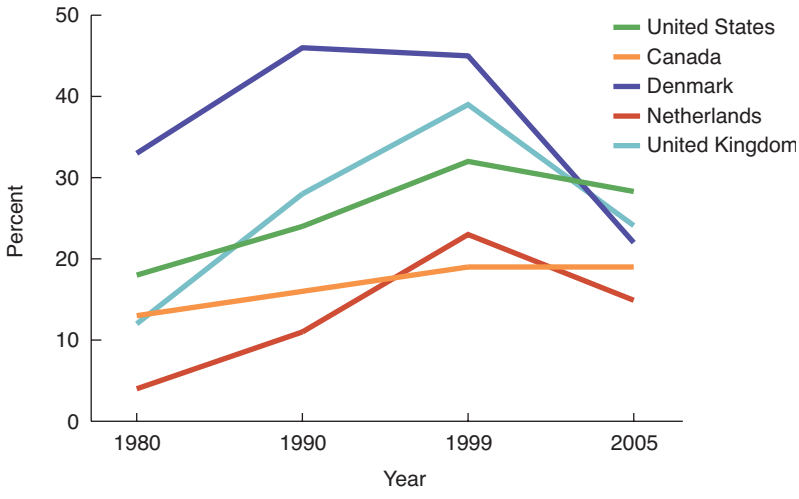

FIGURE 11.2 Trends in Births to Unmarried Women, 1980 to 2005. Across nations, births to unmarried women rose between 1980 and 1999, but have fallen or remained stable since then.
SOURCE: **Childstats.gov.** Accessed May 2009.

childless as are 19 percent of those aged 40 to 44 (Dye 2005). Many of these intend to have children eventually, but have decided to wait until they are established in a career or in a stable marriage with someone who earns a good income.

decoding the data

Poverty and Single Motherhood

In the United States, single motherhood is closely linked to poverty. In Europe, it's not. The difference lies in the support that different governments give to single mothers.

SOURCE: Gustafsson & Stafford (2009).

	Sweden	Netherlands	United States
Percentage of preschoolers raised by single mothers	11%	6%	28%
Percentage of single mothers who are employed	89	24	66
Percentage of single mothers living in poverty	6	8	53

Explaining the Data: Swedish mothers are more likely to work than are Dutch or American mothers. What kinds of support do you think Sweden offers that allows almost all Swedish mothers to work?

Dutch mothers are much less like likely to work than are Swedish or American mothers. Yet almost no Dutch single mothers are poor. What kind of support do you think they receive from the Dutch government? What resources would American single mothers need to avoid poverty?

How can the ideology of the American Dream help explain the different situations in Sweden, the Netherlands, and the United States?

Choosing Childlessness

While most women and men do eventually want children, increasing numbers have decided that they are uninterested in having children. Of course, this choice depends on access to effective contraception. But it also reflects social changes.

There have always been men who find sufficient satisfaction in their lives that they consider children both unnecessary for happiness and a hindrance to their work and other interests. As more women find satisfaction in their work and other aspects of their lives, they may come to adopt similar attitudes (Park 2005). These decisions are bolstered by the belief—backed by research—that having children *reduces* marital satisfaction and has little impact on happiness during middle age or later life (Umberson et al. 2005). Childlessness is also particularly common among women who were the eldest daughters in large families; these women often feel that they already raised several children and have no interest in doing so again.

Adoption

For those who want children but are single, lesbian, gay, or unable to bear or conceive children, adoption is often the best route to parenthood. In addition, about one-quarter of those who adopt do so simply because they would like to give a needy child a home, while a small percentage adopt stepchildren or the children of relatives (Fisher 2003).

However, it's not easy to find a healthy, white or Asian infant (the preference of most U.S. adoptive families) who is available for adoption. In 1963, when abortion was illegal and single motherhood was highly stigmatized among white Americans, about 40 percent of babies born to unwed white mothers were given up for adoption (Fisher 2003). These days, less than 1 percent are. (Single motherhood has consistently been more common and less stigmatized among African Americans.) As a result, increasing numbers of Americans now seek babies to adopt overseas, and obtaining a baby to adopt is difficult and expensive.

Big Cheese Photo LLC/Alamy

Now that birth control and abortion have significantly reduced the number of unwanted babies, and fewer single mothers give up their babies, it has become increasingly difficult to find babies to adopt. As a result, international adoption has become popular—at least among those who can afford it.

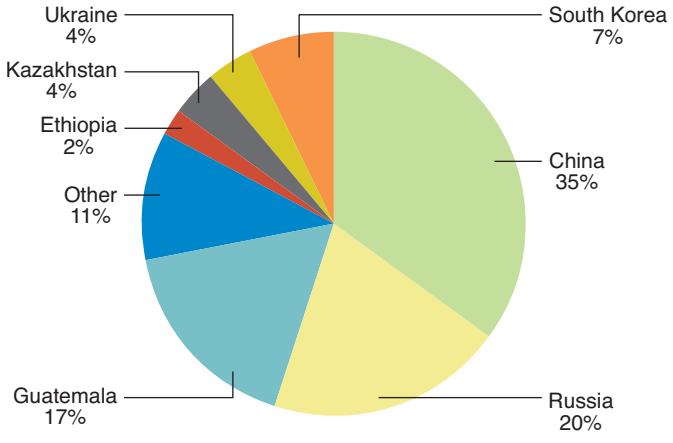

FIGURE 11.3 Sources of Recent International Adoptions by U.S. Residents
U.S. residents have adopted more babies from China than from any other country.
SOURCE: Selman (2007).

Adoption can be a wonderful way to create a family, and large, long-term studies find that the overwhelming majority of adoptions are highly successful for both parents and children. This is true even when the children are adopted after spending up to a few years in orphanages (Fisher 2003). But adoption also means the *disruption* of a family: One family lost a baby for another to get a baby. Even when mothers choose to give away a baby, they typically do so because they have no other viable choice: They cannot afford to feed a baby, they and their baby will suffer great stigma if they raise the child out of wedlock, or they lack the basic social support that anyone needs to raise a child. This is why about 50,000 children are adopted yearly from the U.S. child welfare system, whereas in Sweden, where mothers (whether married or not) receive extensive social services and support, fewer than a dozen children are put up for adoption each year (Rothman 2005).

Overseas adoptions also raise serious issues about the **commodification of children**. When couples who want to adopt are willing to pay up to $35,000 for a child, children in poorer countries become *commodities*: goods available for purchase—or theft. The commodification of children refers to the process through which children become treated as goods available for purchase.

There is growing evidence that many children adopted from poorer countries by Westerners have been bought, coerced, or stolen from their birth parents without the knowledge of the adoptive parents (Graff 2008; Smolin 2006). Figure 11.3 shows the nations that have sent the most babies to the United States. The problem is most severe in Guatemala, the source of 17 percent of recent U.S. international adoptions (Figure 11.3).

Work versus Family

These days, among couples with and without children, most spend considerably less time together than couples did twenty years ago (Amato et al. 2007). There are several reasons for this. First, 69 percent of married women aged 25 to 34 are now in the labor force (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2009a). Second, for middle-class Americans, workdays and work weeks are growing longer. Individuals must work early, late, and on weekends and must take work home to demonstrate that they are serious players. Working-class Americans, on the other hand, increasingly can find only part-time employment. Those who have full-time jobs, meanwhile, often must work overtime to

The **commodification of children** refers to the process through which children become treated as goods available for purchase.

earn enough to make ends meet. Still others are pressured to work extra hours off the books and without pay in order to keep their jobs (Ehrenreich 2001). As a result, both working-class and middle-class parents can experience a time bind at home. Family meals are increasingly rare, and time at home becomes rigidly scheduled as parents try to get themselves to work, do the laundry, keep their home reasonably clean, and get their children to school or other activities on time.

This time bind is often explained as the inevitable result of decreasing real wages, global competitiveness in the workplace, and the growing taste for expensive consumer goods. In an influential study, however, sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1997) argues that many middle-class parents are choosing to spend more time at work because they find work more rewarding than being at home with their family. The more hectic it gets at home, the nicer the job looks. Bosses and co-workers hardly ever spill their juice, dirty their diapers, cry, or slam out of the house because they cannot use the car. Compared with home, the workplace tends to be relatively quiet and orderly and the work rewarding. For many, work rather than home is the place where you can put your feet up and drink a quiet cup of coffee, work is the place where you can get advice on your meddlesome mother-in-law or crumbling marriage, and work is the place where employers notice that you're under a lot of stress and provide free professional counseling. Plus, of course, at work there are paychecks, promotion opportunities, and recognition ceremonies.

More recent research, however, suggests that most people work such long hours only because they have no choice (Jacobs & Gerson 2004). On a more positive note, recent research also suggests that, whatever the stresses of long workweeks, parents are finding ways to manage this time bind without cutting back on time spent with children (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie 2006). In fact, today's mothers spend as much time with their children as did mothers 40 years ago, and fathers spend considerably more time with children today. The difference is that today's mothers have cut back dramatically on the housework they do, whereas today's fathers do a little more than they used to. In addition, parents preserve the time they can spend with their children by having fewer children and, if they can afford it, by hiring more outside help.

These solutions, however, are simply means to help parents work even longer hours. Real solutions would require a reduction in overtime work, a living wage that enabled individuals to work fewer hours, and a cultural shift that valued raising children as much as careers. For the time being, it seems likely that Americans will continue to be stressed by the competing demands of work and family.

Problems in the American Family

Some couples swear that they never have an argument and never disagree. These people are certainly in the minority, however, for most intimate relationships involve some stress and strain. We become concerned when these stresses and strains affect the mental and physical health of the individuals and when they affect the stability of society. In this section, we cover two problems in the U.S. family: violence and divorce.

Violence

Child abuse is nothing new, nor is wife battering. These forms of family violence, however, didn't receive much attention until recent years. In a celebrated court

case in 1871, a social worker had to invoke laws against cruelty to animals in order to remove a child from a violent home. There were laws specifying how to treat your animals, but no restrictions on how wives and children were to be treated. In recent years, however, we have become both more aware and less tolerant of violence in the home.

The incidence of child abuse is particularly hard to measure, since it is difficult to obtain permission to interview children outside of their parents' presence. Surveys of child protective services professionals give us at least a starting point for estimating abuse. These surveys suggest that each year, 1.5 million children are known to be sexually, physically, or emotionally abused by their parents or caregivers, with about one-third of these receiving serious physical injuries (Sedlak & Broadhurst 1996). This figure is obviously an underestimate, as it does not include those whose abuse remains hidden. For this reason, the best data currently available come from a national random survey of 16,000 Americans conducted for the National Institute of Justice (Tjaden & Thoennes 1998). Of women interviewed, 10 percent reported experiencing rape or attempted rape during their childhood, primarily at the hands of family members. These figures, too, are likely to be substantial underestimates, since they do not include those adults who refused to talk about their experiences. In addition, the survey did not include individuals who for whatever reason were in prison, a mental or general hospital, or some other institution at the time of the survey—all settings in which a disproportionate number of residents have experienced childhood abuse.

The same survey gives us our best measure of the extent of violence between adults in families (Tjaden & Thoennes 2000). The survey found that 22 percent of women and 7 percent of men have been physically assaulted by a spouse or cohabitant of the opposite sex (Table 11.1). In addition, women were twice as likely as men to have required medical care after being assaulted. Violence was almost as common in male homosexual couples as in heterosexual couples, but was much rarer among lesbians. In other words, men are more likely than women to batter their partners, whether those partners are male or female. The good news is that violence among married couples has dropped by about half over the last 20 years (Amato et al. 2007).

Recently, concern also has been raised about violence directed at dependent, vulnerable, elderly parents by their adult children. Research has found, however, that most victims of elder abuse have been attacked by their spouses rather than by their children (Bergen 1998).

Janine Wiedel Photolibrary/Alamy

Although violence among married couples has declined, it remains distressingly common. Men are more likely than women to beat their spouses because men are more likely to believe that it is their right to control their spouses.

TABLE 11.1 Violence between Married and Cohabiting Partners

	Percentage Who Have Been Assaulted by a Partner
Men with female partners	7%
Women with female partners	11
Men with male partners	23
Women with male partners	22

SOURCE: Tjaden & Thoennes 2000.

Family violence is not restricted to any class or race (Johnson & Ferraro 2000). It occurs in the homes of lawyers as well as the homes of welfare mothers. Violence is most likely to occur when individuals feel they are losing control, whether over their spouse or over other aspects of their lives. One reason men are more likely than women to beat their spouses is because they are more likely to believe that they *should* control their spouses (Johnson & Ferraro 2000).

Ending family violence will not be easy. Nevertheless, new laws against various forms of family violence represent important first steps in this battle.

Divorce

About 10 percent of all U.S. marriages that began in 1890 eventually ended in divorce (Cherlin 1992). Today, it's estimated that 40 to 50 percent of first marriages will eventually end in divorce (Kreider 2005).

Currently, more than 2 million U.S. adults and approximately 1 million children are affected annually by divorce. What factors make a marriage more likely to fail? Table 11.2 displays some of the predictors of divorce within the first 10 years of marriage. Research consistently finds six factors especially important (Bramlett & Mosher 2002; Teachman 2002; Amato et al. 2007):

- *Age at marriage*. Probably the best predictor of divorce is a youthful age at marriage. Marrying as a teenager or even in the early twenties doubles chances for divorce compared with those who marry later (see Table 11.2).
- *Parental divorce*. People whose parents divorced are themselves more likely to divorce.
- *Premarital childbearing*. Having a child before marriage reduces the stability of subsequent marriages. If an unwed woman marries before giving birth, however, that marriage is no more likely than others to end in divorce.
- *Education*. The higher one's education, the less likely one's marriage is to end in divorce. College graduates are only half as likely to divorce as are those without college degrees (Hurley 2005). Partly this is because people with higher educations are more likely to come from two-parent families, avoid premarital childbearing, and marry later. Independent of these other factors, however, higher education does reduce the chances of divorce.
- *Race*. African Americans are substantially more likely than whites, Hispanics, or Asians to get divorced, although the difference has declined over time (Teachman 2002).
- *Religion*. Catholics are significantly less likely than others to get divorced, even after a variety of other demographic variables are taken into account.

Societal-Level Factors

Age at marriage, parental divorce, premarital childbearing, education, race, and religion affect whether a particular marriage succeeds or fails. These personal characteristics, however, cannot explain why between 40 and 50 percent of first marriages begun this year will probably end in divorce, compared to only 10 percent a century ago (Kreider 2005). This huge increase in divorce rates is a social problem, not a personal trouble, and to explain it we need to look at social structure.

Rising divorce rates are not unique to the United States (Figure 11.4 on page 280). Although divorce has always been more prevalent in the United States than

TABLE 11.2 Factors Predicting Whether First Marriage Will Break Up within the First 10 Years

The probability that a first marriage will end in divorce is currently between 40 and 50 percent. Divorce is more likely for African Americans; children of divorced parents; and persons who marry young, have limited education, or have a child before marriage.

	% Ending in Divorce
Total	23%
Age at Marriage	
<18	48
18–19	40
20–24	29
25 or over	24
Education	
Less than 12 years	42
12 years	36
13 years or more	29
Children before marriage	
No	31
Yes	50
Race	
White	32
African American	47
Hispanic	34
Asian	20
Children of divorced parents	
Yes	43
No	29

SOURCE: Bramlett & Mosher 2002; U.S. Bureau of the Census 2006.

elsewhere, divorce rates have slowly crept up in other industrialized nations also. These changes are strongly associated with economic changes. In past centuries, individuals' main assets were tools or land. Because divorce meant that one spouse would lose those assets, few could afford to consider it. In today's economy, middle-class individuals' main assets are their education and experience. Because people can walk away from a marriage and take these assets along, divorce no longer seems as risky. At the same time, changes in the economy have made it more difficult for lower-class men and women to support themselves or a family. The resulting economic hardships cause enormous stress within relationships, often resulting in divorce. Finally, now that women have greater opportunities to support themselves outside marriage, divorce can seem a more appealing option. All these

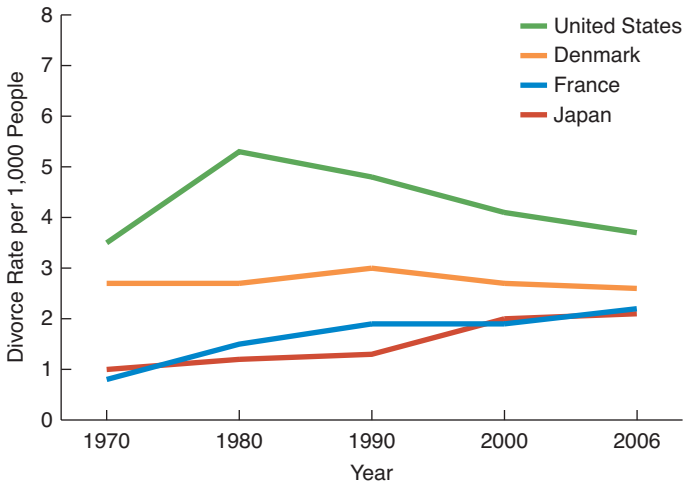

FIGURE 11.4 Trends in Divorce Rates per 1,000 People
Divorce rates have fallen in the United States since 1980, while generally rising in other industrialized nations. Nevertheless, rates remain higher in the United States than in any other nation.
SOURCE: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2009).

changes leave women and men with fewer reasons to stay married. Nevertheless, it is important to note that most people whose marriages end in divorce eventually remarry, with remarriage especially common among young people, whites, and men (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine 2000).

Despite the very real problems many families face, family relationships continue to be a major source of satisfaction for most Americans throughout their lives.

Where This Leaves Us

Despite all the changes and disruptions in families today, they remain the major source of economic support for children and of social support for people of all ages. Families also provide us with an important arena in which we can develop our self-concept, learn to interact with others, and internalize society's norms. Without the strong bonds of love and affection that characterize family ties, these developmental tasks are difficult if not impossible. Thus, the family is essential for the production of socialized members, people who can fit in and play a productive part in society.

The family is important not just in childhood but throughout the life course. Although we don't always get what we desire, our family members are still usually the ones we turn to when we need love, emotional support, financial assistance, and companionship. If you need an emergency loan to replace your car after an accident, or you need someone who will care for you for weeks on end while you recover from an illness, you are most likely to call on a close family member.

Given these benefits that the family gives to both the individual and society, it makes sense to try both to support the family and to reduce some of its more oppressive features. This goal is not impossible. Despite current rates of divorce, illegitimacy, childlessness, and domestic abuse, there are signs of health in the family: the durability of the mother–child bond, the frequency of remarriage, the number of stepfathers who willingly support other men's biological children, and the frequency with which elderly persons rely on and get help from their children.

There is no doubt that the family is changing. When you ask a young man what his father did when he was growing up, you are increasingly likely to hear, "What father?" or "Which father?" These recent changes must be viewed as at least potentially troublesome. At present we have no institutionalized mechanisms comparable to the family for giving individuals social support or for caring for children. The importance of these tasks suggests that the needs of families and especially children must be moved closer to the top of the national agenda.

Summary

1. Marriage and family are the most basic institutions found in society. In all societies, these institutions meet universal needs such as regulation of sexual behavior, replacement through reproduction, child care, and socialization.
2. Types of families include extended families, nuclear families, and blended families. Nuclear families are no longer very common.
3. High rates of divorce and increases in the participation of women in the labor force have led to major changes in the social structure of childhood. Nowadays, many U.S. children spend some time in a single-parent household before they are 18. About one quarter of preschoolers with employed mothers attend day-care centers.
4. The transition to adulthood occurs later than it used to because young people now attend school longer, marry later, and have more trouble finding work.
5. Mate selection depends on love but also on propinquity, homogamy, and shared values. Intermarriage is now more common, especially among more educated groups.
6. Because children are both leaving home later and returning home for economic reasons, middle-aged couples no longer can count on having an "empty nest." In addition, middle-aged persons may take their parents into their homes, or may find that they need to move in with their children.
7. The increasing participation of wives in the breadwinning role is a major change in family roles. Although

most Americans now believe that husbands and wives should share in household labor, women still perform about two-thirds of household labor.

8. Although fathers' involvement in child care has increased, they are more likely to play with children than to take responsibility for less pleasant, everyday tasks. Stepparenting is particularly difficult because often both adults and children are unclear about stepparents' roles.
9. Cohabitation is now a common choice for couples of all ages. Many cohabiting couples eventually marry, but a sizable minority are content to put off marriage indefinitely. The decline in marriage rates and increase in rates of cohabitation and divorce lead some to suggest that we are now experiencing the deinstitutionalization of marriage.
10. Growing numbers of women now choose to delay childbearing or to forego having children altogether. Forty percent of U.S. births now occur outside of marriage. Teenage pregnancy stems from poverty, a lack of easily available contraception, and a lack of other ways to find meaning and personal satisfaction.
11. As the stigma against single motherhood has declined, it has become more difficult and expensive to find a child to adopt. Babies are most often available for adoption when single mothers are stigmatized and receive few social supports for raising a child on their own. The vast majority of adoptions are successful for both child and adoptive parents.
12. Primarily because of economic pressures, married couples now spend considerably less time together than did couples in the past.
13. Violence against both children and intimate partners is relatively common in U.S. homes. In both homosexual and heterosexual relationships, men are more likely than women to batter their partners, although battering has declined significantly over the last 20 years. Family violence is most likely when individuals feel they have lost control over their lives and their spouses and believe that they have a right to control their spouses.
14. It is estimated that 40 to 50 percent of first marriages will end in divorce. Factors associated with divorce include age at marriage, parental divorce, premarital childbearing, education, race, and religion. Reduced economic dependence on marriage underlies many of these trends.

Thinking Critically

1. What functions are served by nuclear families? What are the major dysfunctions of nuclear families? What are the benefits and problems of extended and blended families?
2. Analyze the mate selection processes that you (or someone close to you) have undergone. Show how propinquity, homogamy, endogamy, and appearance were or were not involved. What role did parents play?
3. Do you know anyone who is taking care of an elderly parent or grandparent? Why do you think that person rather than some other family member has assumed that responsibility? What personal characteristics and what relational characteristics are involved?
4. How many children do you plan to have? What do you think the advantages and disadvantages will be? How and on what basis do you think you and your significant other should divide child-care responsibilities?

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