**CHAPTER 1**

**MARRIAGE, RELATIONSHIPS, AND FAMILY COMMITMENTS:**

**MAKING CHOICES IN A CHANGING SOCIETY**

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

# At the end of this chapter, the student should be able to do the following:

1. Explain why researchers and policy makers need to define family, even though definitions are not always agreed upon and can be controversial.
2. Explain why there is no typical American family, and relate ways that family structure, or form, is increasingly diverse.
3. Describe and give examples of various society-wide, structural conditions that impact families.
4. Discuss why the best life-course decisions are informed ones made consciously.
5. Explain and give examples of how families provide individuals with a place to belong.
6. Demonstrate why there is a tension in our culture between familistic values on the one hand and individualistic values on the other hand.
7. Identify families worldwide, and appreciate that global situations and events affect family life in the United States.

**LECTURE OUTLINE**

**I. Overview**

This text has three goals: 1. Appreciate the variety and diversity among families today. 2. Become more sensitive to family issues both in the United States and worldwide. 3. Understand your past and present family situations and anticipate future possibilities. 4. Be more conscious of the personal decisions you make throughout your life and of the societal influences that affect those decisions.

**II. Defining Family**

This text defines family as: any sexually expressive, parent-child, or other kin relationship in which people—usually related by ancestry, marriage, or adoption—1. form and economic or otherwise practical unit and care for any children or other dependents, 2. consider their identity to be significantly attached to the group, and 3. commit to maintaining that group over time.

A. Family Functions

1. Raising children responsibly

2. Providing economic and other practical support

3. Offering emotional security

1. Traditionally, both law and social science specified that the family consisted of people related by blood, marriage, or adoption. Some definitions of the family specified a common household, economic interdependency, and sexual/reproductive relations.
2. The U.S. Census Bureau defines a family as two or more persons sharing a household and who are related by blood, marriage, or adoption.
3. America is increasingly postmodern. Ultimately, there is no typical family.
4. Until the last 50 years, the nuclear family was considered the modern family.
5. As families have become less traditional, the legal definition of a family has become much more flexible.
6. The text defines family as any sexually expressive, parent-child, or other kin relationship in which people—usually related by ancestry, marriage, or adoption—form an economic unit and care for any children or other dependents; consider their identity to be significantly attached to the group; and are committed to maintaining that group over time.
7. “Family Decline” or “Family Change?”
8. A discussion on “Family Decline” or “Family Change” explores the debate as to whether current changes in the family are positive or negative according to the views of social scientists and researchers.

**III. A Sociological Imagination: Personal Troubles and Some Social Conditions That Impact Families**

1. Ever-New Biological and Communication Technologies
   1. Assistive Reproduction Technologies involve the manipulation of sperm or egg or both in the absence of sexual intercourse including: artificial insemination, donor insemination, in vitro fertilization, surrogacy, egg sale or donation, embryo transfers.
   2. Communication Technologies

a. Communication by cell phones, internet sites and GPS facilitate constant and global access to children, parents and extended family.

b.. Internet access causes family boundaries more permeable.

c.. Results in a “digital divide” between those who have access to technology and

those who do not have access

1. Economic Uncertainty
   1. Over the past 35 years, the inequality gap has increased.
   2. The recent recession affected nearly all of America’s families, but took a greater toll on the middle and working class than on the wealthy.
   3. Income, wealth, and poverty rates diverge by race/ethnicity, education, and parents’ education.
2. Historical Periods and Events
   1. The shift from an agricultural to industrial economy changed family life irrevocably.
   2. Historical periods also influence attitudes and values.
3. Demographic Characteristics
   1. Age: Life expectancy has increased dramatically and has had vast consequences for family life.
   2. Religion: Religious affiliation and practice is a significant influence on family life.
   3. Race and Ethnicity: Although race is a social construction, there are very real practices and outcomes associated with different races.

a. America is increasingly diverse ethnically due to immigration, refugees in America, and higher fertility rates among racial and ethnic minorities.

b. Transnational and binational families add to America’s diversity.

c. Racial and ethnic stratification continues to exist.

1. Family Policy: A Family Impact Lens
   1. Family policy involves all the procedures, regulations, attitudes, and goals of programs and agencies, workplace, educational institutions, and government that affect families.
   2. Political decisions regarding families should take a family impact lens approach.

**IV. The Freedom and Pressures of Choosing**

A. Social Influences and Personal Choices

1. Common choice is easier for people to make.

2. Expands people’s options (e.g. availability of effective contraception).

3. Limits people’s options (e.g. United States laws against polygamy).

B. Choosing Knowledgeably

1. Choosing knowledgeably involves rational consideration of many alternatives and the

recognition of the social pressures that influence choices.

2. Influence of the beliefs and values of society

3. Structural constraints are economic and social forces that limit personal choices.

C. Influence of people on society

1. Individuals can inspire social change through new insights.

2. Increased discussions about social issues and involvement in organizations.

3. Living by personal values rather than accepted cultural norms.

D. Making Informed Decisions

1. Deciding versus sliding as a way of dealing with choices.

2. Making a conscious decision recognizes options and social pressures.

3. Consideration of the consequences rather than choosing the easiest option.

4. Existence of the gut-factor or the emotional part of decisions making.

5. Effect of the decision on personal future as well as on others.

6. Adulthood is viewed as a time for continued personal development, growth and change with changing focus on goals and values.

E. Choosing by Default (Sliding)

1. People make decisions by default when they are not aware of all the alternatives and

they choose the easiest options

2. Knowledgeable decision making has respect for personal feelings and includes regular

testing of decisions against those feelings (as well as the changes in the social

environment).

**VI. A Family of Individuals**

Americans place a high value on the family. Family values such as family togetherness, stability, and loyalty focus on the family as a whole. Placing family well-being over individual interests and preferences is termed familism.

A. Families as a Place to Belong

1. Families create a place to belong by creating both physical and psychological

boundaries between themselves and the rest of the world.

2. Families create a place of individual and communal identity, or family identity.

3. Provide a setting for developing self-concept or basic feelings surrounding a person’s

own abilities, characteristics and worth.

B. Familistic (Communal) Values and Individualistic (Self-Fulfillment) Values

1. Family members must negotiate balance between individual separateness and family togetherness.

2. Opposing values of familism (including togetherness and family loyalty) and individualism create tensions within individuals, between individuals and within society that must be resolved.

3.American society holds individuality and personal freedom over the tradition of

Familism

C. People as Individuals and Family Members

1. Shifts in the balance of individuality and familism have meant that family

members have become less predictable than in the past.

2. Individuals must take responsibility for their own choices rather than blaming the

family.

3. Flexibility with changing family situations that can cause disruptions.

**VII. Marriage and Families: Four Themes**

A. Personal decisions must be made throughout the life course.

B. People are influenced by the society around them.

C. Today’s society is characterized by increased economic, ethnic, and family diversity, where increased tension exists between family and individual values.

D. Personal decision making feeds back into society and changes it.

**CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND LECTURE SUGGESTIONS**

1. You may benefit from four articles that have appeared in the American Sociological Association journal, *Teaching Sociology*. The first three articles deal with different teaching strategies that you may wish to utilize in your classroom: Cheryl D. Childers’ “Using Crossword Puzzles as an Aid to Studying Sociological Concepts” (April, 1996: 231–135); Janet Cosbey’s “Using Contemporary Fiction to Teach Family Issues” (July, 1997: 227–233); and Stephen J. Scanlan and Seth L. Feinberg’s “The Cartoon Society: Using *The Simpsons* to Teach and Learn Sociology” (April, 2000: 127–139). The fourth article discusses the impact of a family sociology course on undergraduate students’ family values: Lynn Magdol, “Liberal Values and a Liberal Education: The Effect of a Family Sociology Course on Undergraduate Students’ Family Values” (January, 2003: 95–109).

2. If you have a non-traditional, “baby boom generation” student in your class, ask that person to describe American society’s attitude toward marriage during the 1960s. If your class consists of traditional students only, you can begin this discussion by highlighting the atmosphere that existed in high schools and on college campuses during that time period: the popularity of “going steady” and being “lavaliered”; the phenomenon of women attending college in order to get their “Mrs.” degree; and the feeling that getting married was the last step toward full, adult responsibility. After this “stage” has been set, ask the students to think about contemporary attitudes toward marriage. How are these attitudes different from those that existed five decades ago? Are there any similarities? If so, what are they?

1. Students usually have not thought *analytically* about how their marriage- and family-based decisions may be made *by default*, rather than *knowledgeably*. Ask them whether they have known anyone personally who may have married a person who was favored by parents or other family members, or whether they are familiar with a situation where a person chose to have children because of social pressures rather than an *individual* desire.

4. Students who have never studied marriage and the family are likely to view kinship in terms of consanguineal and legal relationships, rather than as sociologically significant relationships. You can enhance students’ understanding of kinship by emphasizing that consanguineal ties are usually created through legal arrangements (principally marriage). The concept of “fictive kin” (“She’s like a sister to me,” “Uncle Harry,” etc.) can be employed as an advantage in illustrating how the most important dimension of kinship lies in the importance that we assign to such arrangements.

5. Engage your students in discussion about the various myths that surround marriage and family. Ask them to list their three favorite television shows (not counting sports or shows that would not include a portrayal of marriages or families). Second, tell them to make note of how family issues are portrayed in these shows. Ask them to vocalize how their own families are similar to or different from what they see on television. Finally, pose the question, “How do television images contribute to myths about the family?”

6. Divide your class into three groups. Have each group take one of the perspectives on the changing family as presented in the text (“The family is deteriorating;” or the family-decline perspective, “the family is changing, not deteriorating;” or the family-change perspective and “the family is stronger than ever.”) Discuss it in detail, and then make a brief, joint presentation to the entire class about that particular perspective/approach.

7. Ask each person in class to write their personal definition of family on a 3x5 note card, without including their names. Collect the cards, mix them up, and pass them out randomly. Have each student read the definition on the card in front of them, and make a comment about it. Allow each to expand on the definition or to challenge it.

8. Have students discuss the traditional nuclear family model, where the father works and the mother stays home with the children. How many were raised in this environment? Does our society value these roles? Which parent worked more, and made a higher salary, if both worked? Did anyone have a stay-at-home caretaker other than a parent? Did extended family members live at home?

9. Families have taken a variety of dominant forms over the years. A good lecture starter would be to describe the dominant family and living arrangements at various periods of time in history for European and non-European societies, just as a way of showing how much things change.

10. Divide the class into two groups. Assign one group the topic “Technology has positively affected family relationships,” and the second group the topic “Technology has negatively affected family relationships.” Give the students time within their group to develop their arguments and host a debate between the two groups.

**STUDENT ACTIVITIES**

1. Have your students address the question “What is a family?” In some instances, this query has no particular *legal* implications: For example, some people may not regard a childless couple as a “family,” but there’s nothing *legal* or *illegal* about having or not having children. In many other cases, however, some confusing legal issues are involved: Should homosexual couples be permitted to legally marry? Should cohabitating couples have legal obligations to each other, especially in the event that they terminate their relationships?

2. Students tend to have an ethnocentric point of view about the family: They have preconceived notions about what *family* is. Diane E. Levy offers an interesting assignment for students in her article “Teaching Family Ritual: Sunday, Sausage, and Solidarity” (*Teaching Sociology*, October, 1992: 311–13). The project consists of asking students to recount *rituals* in their own families; not any connected to official holidays, but, rather, family events that were spontaneously originated and have developed their own tradition. Levy describes how this can be a valuable activity for each student individually, and also an excellent vehicle for class discussion. Another possibility involves the use of novels in teaching about family issues: Janet Cosbey’s “Using Contemporary Fiction to Teach Family Issues” (*Teaching Sociology*, July, 1997: 227–33). Yet another prospect involves the use of connecting with others over social media as a way to help students to develop a cross-cultural perspective on families. Sara C. Hare offers an interesting strategy, whereby students are matched with international students on campus who have signed up for an e-mail pen pal: “Using E-Mail to Promote Cross-Cultural Understanding of Families” *(Teaching Sociology*, January, 1999: 67–73) and Miriam Sobré-Denton comments on the use of social media to create global connections in “Virtual intercultural bridgework: *Social* *media*, virtual cosmopolitanism, *and* activist community-building” (*New Media & Society*, September 2016; vol. 18, 8:  1715-1731).

3. Have students interview married couples regarding the factors that contributed to their choice of spouse. Include couples of varied ages, racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic (SES) groups. Students should structure their questions so that they can obtain information on

a. the degree to which social factors contributed to the decision (i.e., age expectations, race, historical events, social class, religion, etc.), and

b. the extent to which their marriage decision was the result of knowledgeable or default decision making (i.e., were alternatives explored, values clarified, a gut factor recognized, etc.?).

Findings from interviews (conducted in or out of class) can be reported by students or summarized by the instructor.

4. Provide an opportunity for students to practice making personal and group decisions and to feel the effects of social factors on that decision making. Ask students to describe on paper various characteristics of their ideal marriage partner. After completing their own personal descriptions, arrange students into groups of four or five. Ask them to reach a group consensus of what would be the ideal marriage partner. Students in many cases will see their own descriptions challenged and will argue in support of them, while others will go along with whatever the group decides. After each small group achieves consensus and shares their descriptions, incorporate into a discussion:

a. whether a class consensus is possible,

b. the extent to which students feel their individual decisions are influenced by the group, and

c. the extent to which students feel the group’s decision is influenced by individuals.

5. Divide your class into small groups of five or six students. Ask them to address the question of how domestic and international terrorism have affected the family as an institution in American society. Remind them that incidents like that at Columbine High School may be regarded as acts of domestic terrorism. Are some family members more likely to be influenced by the specter of terrorism than others? If so, how? Is the relationship between parents and children affected by terrorism? How? What about children’s level of trust in the social institutions they depend upon to protect their welfare?

6. Students often believe that love is destined and not determined by social, structural factors. This typically leads them to believe that relationships are much more heterogenous than is the reality. Have one half of the classroom search through contemporary advertisements and report back about how homogenous couples are. The other half of the class should be tasked with surveying the couples they know and asking questions about homogamy. As a class, they can compare results.

**CLASSROOM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Why is there so much disagreement concerning the definition of “family?” Do you think there is a “normal” family? Why or why not? What makes a family?

2. Do you think that you make *knowledgeable* decisions? Give a few examples that relate to marriage and family concerns in your personal life.

3. Do you think your personal values align with *familism* or *individualism*? What kinds of influences have shaped your values in one direction or the other?

4. Do you think the American family is “declining” or “changing?” What is the basis for your answer?

5. How do increased economic, ethnic, and family diversity affect the tension that exists between family and individual values? Cite some examples.

6. What are some examples of a personal or family problem that is at least partly a result of problems in society?

7. What are some changes in law and social policy that you would like to see put in place to enhance family life?

8. Perhaps the greatest concern Americans have about contemporary family change is its impact on children. What do these family data tell us about the family lives of children today?

9. Although the modern family form is much more diverse, we still see most marriages and relationships attempting to recreate the traditional family form. Do you think that’s healthy or should we be working harder to change social expectations?

10. What are some examples of structural constraints within our culture that limit personal choices?

Are there any ways that individuals or groups have tried to challenge these constraints?

USING POPULAR FILM IN THE CLASSROOM

*This Is Where I Leave You* (2014)

Content: Four siblings return to their childhood home after their father dies to live together under the same roof for a week. They confront the choices and decisions they have made in their adult lives with each other and reconnect as a family.

Assignment: Describe how the film addresses the tension that arises between familistic (communal) values and individualistic (self-fulfillment) values. Have students write about a situation that has occurred within their own family experience where they have felt this tension between these values.

*The Kids are All Right* (2010)

Content: Two children conceived by artificial insemination bring their biological father into their non-traditional family life.

Assignment: Explore the definition of family in the context of the characters in this movie. How does the family in this movie recognize the diversity within the definition of family within the text while acknowledging the essential functions that are included within a family structure? How is this family the same or different than the traditional family structure? Do you feel these commonalities and differences are positive or negative?

*The Family Stone* (2005)

Content: An uptight, conservative, businesswoman accompanies her boyfriend to his eccentric and outgoing family’s annual Christmas celebration and finds that she’s a fish out of water in their free-spirited way of life.

Assignment: Note the particular diversity of this family (single, gay, hearing-impaired, rich, etc.) and discuss how each member responds to each other and to an ‘outside threat’ to their common life together.

*Brokeback Mountain* (2005)

Content: Based on Annie Proulx’s story about a forbidden and secretive relationship between two cowboys and their lives over the years. This film can be graphic at times and emotionally disturbing; it is a very personal and heartbreaking look at dysfunction, homosexual love, family betrayal, and hidden affairs.

Assignment: Explore the attitudes in current culture about homosexuality; how it is portrayed by the media, whether our current definition of family includes same-sex relationships. Examine personal stereotypes towards homosexuality.

*Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993)

Content: After a bitter divorce, an actor (who is first and foremost a father) disguises himself as a female housekeeper to spend secret time with his children held in custody by his ex-wife. This film shows the pain of divorce and the struggle of custody issues in a humorous yet powerful way.

Assignment: Talk about the reasons for divorce in our culture, and the effects divorce has on children. For students who have been through a parents’ divorce (and who are willing to share), ask about custody arrangements, whether the student had adequate time with each parent, and whether the student ever felt caught in the middle.

*Away We Go* (2009)

Content: A couple who is expecting their first child travel around the U.S. in order to find a perfect place to start their family. Along the way, they have misadventures and find fresh connections with an assortment of relatives and old friends who just might help them discover “home” on their own terms for the first time.

Assignment: One of the enduring themes of this textbook is that decisions should be informed. In this movie, the characters are trying to make an informed decision about where to live and raise their child. What kinds of information are they using? What kinds of information would you use to make this decision?

**CHAPTER ONE REVIEW SHEET**

As a tool to help students review the major content of the chapter, they can complete the chapter review questions by themselves (as a class or homework assignment) or together in small groups. The questions may also be used as an activity or quiz and students may or may not use their texts.

1. How do Americans define family today?

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2. How does the text choose to define the concept of “family?”

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3. What are some current societal trends that impact the family?

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4. Give two examples of how individuals influence their society. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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5. Social factors greatly influence adult options and decisions. Give an example of how each of the following social factors could influence a marital decision.

a. a recession \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

b. more women working outside the home \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

c. longevity \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

d. social class \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

e. racial discrimination \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

f. religion \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

g. age expectations \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

6. When are personal decisions made by default?

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7. What is the difference between *deciding* versus *sliding*?

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8. What is another name for family values? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

9. How do individualistic values of American society impact the family? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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10. What are the four themes that are stated explicitly in the text?

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**INTERNET EXERCISES**

1. Sociologist Paul Rosenblatt works in the Department of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota. In 2006, he completed an intensive, qualitative interview study of couple experiences of sleeping together, from first learning how to share a bed through various challenges that emerge over the life cycle (for example, changes in physical health, changes in body size, menopause, and onset of snoring). His research shows “what couple bed sharing reveals about human needs, the complexities of couple life, culture, and life in modern America.”

Here is the link to an article about his work: <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/19/health/19slee.html?_r=0>

1. One of the dominant themes in Chapter 1 is the recognition that the modern family is *diverse*. The concept of the *stepfamily* is one illustration of how contemporary family settings are often very different in comparison with “traditional” definitions. Go to the following Web address and read any of the articles written by Ron Deal: [www.smartstepfamilies.com](file:///C:\Users\Brad\Downloads\www.smartstepfamilies.com). After you have read the article, respond to the following questions:
2. What are the principal challenges of step-parenting?
3. Do you think that stepfamilies can be as “close” in comparison with more traditional family configurations? Why or why not?

3. One of the most common “variations” on traditional family organization is the *single-parent family*. **Single Parents Network** is a website devoted to the consideration and analysis of issues pertinent to single parents and their family relationships. Check out their website at:

<http://www.singleparentsnetwork.com>. Here, you will find a variety of facts and statistics about single parent families. After you have examined this presentation, summarize what you have learned in a short essay.

4. How should parents talk to their children about war and terrorism? Go to <http://www.familiesonlinemagazine.com/childdevterror.html>, where you will find a very interesting and informative article on this topic. After you have read the article, summarize what you have learned in a short essay. Do you agree with the author’s sentiments? If you disagree, describe your personal point of view in some detail.

5. Postmodern families have gotten a lot of visibility lately. This article from CNN titled “The Evolution of the Modern Family” deals with it explicitly: [http://www.cnn.com/2010/SHOWBIZ/TV/09/01/families.on.tv/](http://www.cnn.com/2010/SHOWBIZ/TV/09/01/families.on.tv/%20%20)  The most successful of these new shows has been Modern Family. What do you think accounts for the success of these shows? Are they accurate portrayals?

**RECOMMENDED READING**

Allen, K. 2000. “A Conscious and Inclusive Family Studies.” *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62: 4–17.

Amato, P. R., Booth, A., Johnson, D. R., & Rogers, S. J. (2009). *Alone Together: How Marriage in America Is Changing*. Harvard University Press.

Coontz, S. (1993). *The Way We Never Were: American Families And The Nostalgia Trap*. Basic Books.

Goodwin, M. (2010). *Baby Markets: Money and the New Politics of Creating Families*. Cambridge University Press.

Lareau, A. (2011). *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life, Second Edition with an Update a Decade Later* (2nd ed.). University of California Press.