# C H A P T E R 1

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

*After reading the chapter, you should be able to:*

Define family and describe various family forms.

Explain the changes in family philosophy and emphasis: the change from institution to companionship and from patriarchy to democracy.

Outline the basic trends in marriage rates, age at first marriage, birthrates and family size, employment of working mothers, and one-parent families.

Summarize the basic trends in divorce rates, remarriage, and blended families.

Describe present trends in premarital sexual behavior, use of contraceptives, and unmarried pregnancy.

Identify family issues relating to various family forms.

Explain behavior and patterns in families using the seven different family theories.

# Intimate Relationships, Marriages, and Families in the Twenty-First Century

Families as we know them today are different from those of previous generations (Glick, 1984, 1989). They differ in structure and composition, size, and function. The reasons people marry and their marital expectations have changed. Changes have also occurred in how families are governed, in who supports families, and in how people behave sexually. An analysis of marriage rates and ages, birthrates, the percentages of working mothers, divorce and remarriage rates, the numbers of reconstituted families, rates of pregnancy and parenthood among single women, and some alternative family forms reveals some significant trends.

We are going to examine some of these changes and trends and their effects on the society and the individual. In addition, it's important for each of us to consider: How have these changes affected me?

## WHAT IS A FAMILY?

What makes a family? Do its members have to be related by blood? By marriage? Do they have to share the same household? We'll examine a few of the countless definitions of *family* that have been formulated in recent decades, and then we'll look at some of the variations in types of families that have been identified by psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists (Levin, 1993; Levin and Trost, 1992; Trost, 1993).

### Some Definitions

The U.S. Bureau of the Census (1999a) defines a family as "two or more persons related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together in a household" (p. 6). Thus, for statistical purposes, the number of families in the United States is equal to the number of households. By this definition, the family may consist of two persons who are not necessarily of different genders: two brothers, two female cousins, a mother and daughter, and so on. They may also be of different genders: a husband and wife, a mother and son, a brother and sister, and so on. If the family includes two adults, they may or may not have children. The common characteristics included in this definition are twofold: (1) The individuals must be related by blood or law, and (2) they must live together in one household.

Thus, according to the Census Bureau, if adult children move out of their parents' household and establish families of their own, they are no longer considered a part of their parents' family.

Other definitions have been proposed. Winch (1971) defined the family as "a set of persons related to each other by blood, marriage, or adoption and whose basic societal function is replacement." But this definition seems to limit family functions to child rearing. Burgess and Locke (1953) defined the family as "a group of persons united by ties of marriage, blood, or adoption; constituting a single household; interacting and communicating with each other in their respective social roles (husband and wife, mother and father, son and daughter, brother and sister); and creating and maintaining a common culture." This definition would eliminate those cohabiting, though not legally related or married. It seems to assume as well that individuals in a family must conform to some sort of prescribed social roles.

None of these definitions seems to cover all types of family situations: nonmarried cohabiting couples, gay and lesbian couples, single-parent households, couples without children, group marriages, and communal living situations. A more comprehensive and less stereotyped definition is used in this book: A **family** is any group of persons united by the ties of marriage, blood, or adoption, or any sexually expressive relationship, in which (1) the adults cooperate financially for their mutual support, (2) the people are committed to one another in an intimate, interpersonal relationship, and (3) the members see their individual identities as importantly attached to the group with an identity of its own.

This definition has a number of advantages. It includes a variety of family structures: the traditional married couple with or without children, single-parent families, families consisting of blood relatives (such as two widowed sisters, a grandparent and grandchildren, and a multigenerational extended family). It also includes persons not related by marriage, blood, or adoption who have a sexual relationship: an unmarried cohabiting couple, a gay or lesbian couple, a group marriage, a communal family. Because this definition insists that the persons be committed and in an intimate, interpersonal relationship, it eliminates cohabiting couples who live together for practical reasons, without commitment, and those who have only a casual relationship

*The conventional idea of a family is two parents and one or more children, but in reality, there are many varieties of family structure.*

even though they may have sex together. The members must see their individual identities as importantly attached to the group, and the group must have an identity of its own. The definition doesn't say that people have to be together continuously, so it can include commuting couples or family members away at college or in the armed services.

### Family Forms

We can categorize families according to their structure and the relationships among the people in them.

A **voluntarily childless family** is a couple who decide not to have children. (Some people refer to this as a child-free family.)

A **single-parent family** consists of a parent (who may or may not have been married) and one or more children.

A **nuclear family** consists of a father, a mother, and their children. This type of family as a proportion of all families has been declining as the family form has become more diverse.

A **family of origin** is the family into which you are born and in which you are raised. The family consists of you, your parents, and your siblings.

A **family of procreation** is the family you establish when you have children of your own.

An **extended family** consists of you, possibly a mate, any children you might have, and other relatives who might live with you in your household or nearby. It can also include grandparents who are helping to care for grandchildren.

A **blended, or reconstituted, family** is formed when a widowed or divorced person, with or without children, remarries another person who may or may not have been married before and who may or may not have children (Dowling, 1983). If either the remarried husband or wife has children from the former marriage, a **stepfamily** is formed.

A **binuclear family** is an original family divided into two by divorce. It consists of two nuclear families: (1) the maternal nuclear family headed by the mother and (2) the paternal family headed by the father. The families include whatever children were in the original family and may be headed by a single parent or two parents if former spouses remarry (Ahrons and Rodgers, 1987).

A **polygamous family** is a single family unit based on the marriage of one person to two or more mates. If the man has more than one wife, a **polygynous family** is formed. If a woman has more than one husband, a **polyandrous family** is formed. Polyandry is rare, but polygyny is practiced in African and Asian countries. Both are illegal in the United States.

A **patriarchal family** is one in which the father is head of the household, with authority over other members of the family.

A **matriarchal family** is one in which the mother is head of the household, with authority over other members of the family.

A **gay or lesbian family** consists of a couple of the same sex, living together and sharing sexual expression and commitment. Some gay or lesbian families include children, usually the offspring of one of the partners.

A **cohabiting family** consists of two people of the opposite sex living together, sharing sexual expression, who are committed to their relationship without formal legal marriage.

When talking about the family, then, we need to specify which type we are referring to. With such a wide variety of family forms, we can no longer assume that the word *family* is synonymous with *nuclear family.*

## CHANGES IN FAMILY PHILOSOPHY AND EMPHASIS

Not only has family structure changed over the years, but there have also been significant changes in family functions (Cheal, 1993; Gubrium and Holstein, 1993). These changes have been from institution to companionship and from patriarchy to democracy.

### From Institution to Companionship

One of the most important changes in family function has been a shift in emphasis (Mancini and Orthner, 1988; Scanzoni, 1987). Traditional views emphasized the role of the family as an institution whose function was to meet the needs of society; this is the **instrumental role** of the family. More modern views of the family tend to emphasize its role in fulfilling personal needs for emotional security and companionship; this is the **expressive role** of the family (Edwards, 1987).

In an industrial society in which the majority of people live in urban areas, neighbors remain strangers, and it becomes harder for people to find friendship, companionship, and emotional support. Affectional needs may not be met; the individual feels isolated and alone even though surrounded by millions of people. In such an impersonal society, it becomes more important to find intimacy, a sense of belonging, and emotional security in the family itself. There is a universal longing to be attached, to relate, to belong, to be needed, to care. Most humans need a profoundly reaffirming experience of genuine intimacy. Erik Erikson (1959) suggested that the achievement of intimacy is one of the major goals of life. In a highly impersonal society, in which emotional isolation is frequent, developing a close family relationship is vital to one's identity and security.

There has been some shift, therefore, in family functions. In the 1800s, people openly admitted to marrying to obtain economic security, to provide goods and services for one another, to attain social status, to reproduce, and to raise children. By the 1970s, people professed to marry for love, companionship, and the satisfaction of emotional needs. Raising healthy and happy children and having economic security are still important reasons for marriage, but love and affection are people's primary expectations in marriage today (Barich and Bielby, 1996).

This shift has placed a greater burden on the family itself. When people establish a family for love, companionship, and emotional security but don't find fulfillment, they become disappointed, frustrated, and full of feelings of failure. The higher their personal expectations, the greater the possibility of failure. Sometimes expectations are charged with so much romantic fantasy that fulfillment becomes impossible. Some couples begin to feel that their personal happiness no longer depends on their being married (Glenn and Weaver, 1988). This is one reason for the high rate of divorce. Rather than staying together for the sake of the family, couples often separate if their personal needs and expectations are not met.

### From Patriarchy to Democracy

Throughout most of our history, the American family was patriarchal (Edwards and Kluck, 1980). The father was considered head of the household, with authority over and responsibilities for other members of the family. He was the supreme authority in making decisions and settling disputes. He was entitled to the deference and respect of other family members, who were expected to be submissive and obedient.

As head of the household, he owned the property, which was passed to the next generation through the male line. This is known as **patrilineal**

*The family pictured here was once considered the ideal. The father was traditionally the head of the household, with authority over all the family members.*

**descent.** The wife and children were expected to reside with the husband and with or near the husband's family, according to his choice. This is **patrilocal residence.** The terms that refer to female descent and residence are **matrilineal descent** and **matrilocal residence.** This practice was seen in traditional Iroquois society, in which men were expected to move to the female household, and important lines of descent were traced through the female.

Generally, in the 1950s and before, one characteristic of the traditional patriarchal family was a clear-cut distinction between the husband's and wife's roles in the family. The husband was the breadwinner and was usually responsible for clearly defined chores that were considered "man's work," such as making house repairs or mowing the lawn. The wife was responsible for "woman's work," including housecleaning, cooking, sewing and mending, and caring for the children.

Although the traditional patriarchal family is often portrayed in idealized form, cracks often developed in its structure. The father who was a tyrant was a difficult and unpleasant taskmaster, feared and respected but not necessarily loved by his wife and children. "Life with father" often meant toil and obedience, regardless of personal desires and feelings. Sons waited impatiently for the time when they would inherit family wealth and property and when they could marry and achieve a man's status. A daughter might hope that marriage would fulfill her dreams, but she sometimes experienced friction living in close proximity to her husband's

family. Husband-wife relationships lasted because women had few alternatives, but there may have been little emotional closeness and companionship. Sex was considered "a man's pleasure and a woman's duty" and often resulted in an endless succession of pregnancies.

Not all patriarchal families were unhappy or unsuccessful. The structures were stable, sustained by law and social custom, as well as by the lack of economic and social opportunities. However, with the cultural climate of activism of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and the women's rights movement of the 1960s, the ideals of the patriarchal family were challenged. The patriarchal family was replaced by the democratic family, in which women were treated more as equals and demanded a greater voice in family governance (Vannoy, 1991).

This change had several causes. First, with the rise of the feminist movement, women gained some economic power and freedom. The first feminist movement in the United States was launched at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, where the first women's rights convention was held. The delegates asserted that "men *and* women are created equal . . . endowed . . . with certain inalienable rights." Starting with almost no political leverage and no money, and with conventional morality against them, the suffragists won enactment of the Married Women's Property Act in the latter half of the nineteenth century and ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1920, which gave women the right to vote. The Married Women's Property Act

*After years of protest, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, women won the right to own property and borrow money with the enactment of the Married Women's Property Act.*



recognized the right of women to hold property and borrow money. As some economic power gradually shifted to women, they gained more power and authority in family governance as well. Property could now be passed on through **bilateral descent** (through both the father and the mother).

Second, in the 1960s and 1970s, increasing educational opportunities for women and the gradual increase in the percentage of married women working outside the home encouraged the adoption of more egalitarian gender roles in the family. As more wives earned an income, more husbands were asked to bear equal responsibility for homemaking and child care. While a sharing of responsibilities was the developing ideal, it was not always followed in practice, and working wives continued to do most of the housework (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983). The general trend, however, is toward a more equal voice in decision making and a more equitable and flexible distribution of family responsibilities; see Chapter 7 for a detailed discussion. In democratic, egalitarian, dual-career families, residence is often **neolocal**—a place where both spouses choose to live, rather than living with either spouse's family.

Third, in the 1960s and 1970s, the demand for equality of sexual expression resulted from the recognition of the sexual needs of women. With such recognition, marriages could be based on the mu-

tual exchange of love and affection. Development of efficient contraceptives also freed women from unwanted childbearing and enabled them to have a personal life of their own and a social life with their husband.

Fourth, the child study movement after World War II catalyzed the development of the child-centered family. No longer was it a matter of what children could do to serve the family; rather, it became a matter of what the family could contribute to the total development of the child. The rights and needs of children as important members of the family were emphasized.

The net result of these and other changes has been the development of a democratic family ideal that emphasizes egalitarian rights and responsibilities in a group concerned with the welfare of all. This ideal has not always been achieved, but family philosophies, forms, and functions continue to change as new needs arise.

## CHANGES IN MARRIAGE AND PARENTHOOD

As we will see, trends in marriage and parenthood have changed in recent decades. The marriage rate has gone down, the age at which people marry has
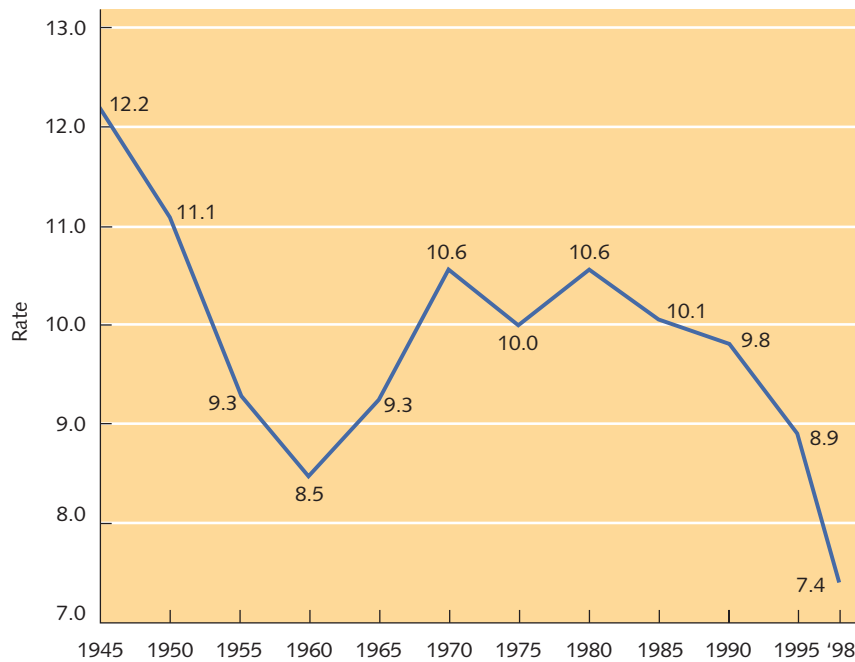
**Figure 1.1**   Marriage Rate per 1,000 Population (*Note:* From *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1999* [Table 155, p. 110] by U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.)

gone up, and the number of children per family has declined.

## Marriage Rates

The marriage rate is the number of persons who marry during the preceding 12 months per 1,000 population. The rate depends on economic and political conditions, as well as on the percentage of persons of marriageable age in the population. The rate reached a peak of 12.2 per 1,000 population in 1945, the last year of World War II. The rate then declined very rapidly after the war, falling to 8.5 per 1,000 in 1960. The rate varied at a fairly high level for two decades and then began to fall again in 1980, after most of the baby boom babies had married (see Figure 1.1). Today the rate is 7.4 per 1,000 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999).
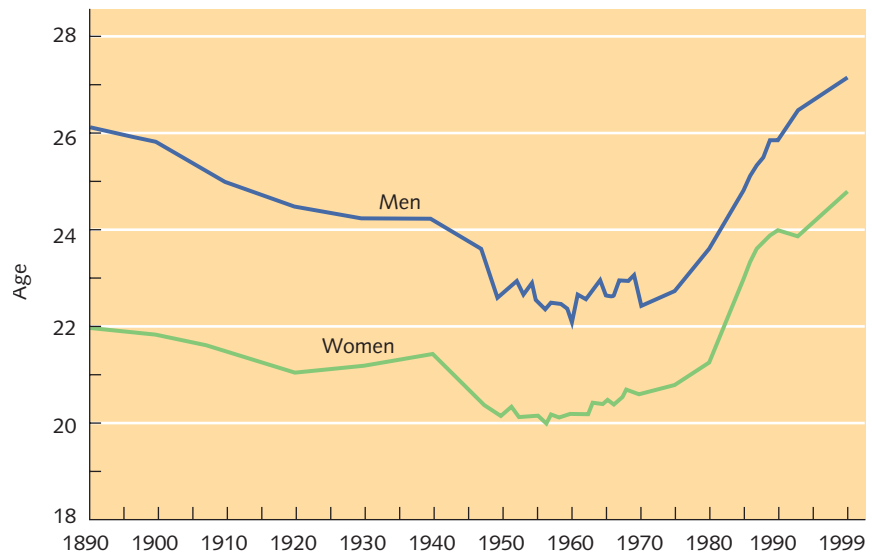
## Age at Marriage

One of the most important trends in the changing family has been the increase in the median age at first marriage (Sporakowski, 1988). The median age at first marriage in 1999 was 27.1 years for men and 24.8 years for women. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the median age at first marriage started a decline that ended in the mid-1950s,

reaching a low of 22.5 years for men and 20.1 years for women. Since then, the estimated median age has been rising, with especially rapid increases since 1980; this trend will be discussed in Chapter 4. Furthermore, the gap in median age of marriage for men and women narrowed to about a 2-year difference in 1995 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999a). Figure 1.2 shows the trend. Not apparent in Figures 1.1 and 1.2 is the fact that marriage and childbearing begin much earlier for women in rural, as opposed to urban, areas (McLaughlin, Lichter, and Johnston, 1993).

A higher age at marriage is associated with an advantaged family background and with school enrollment. Delays in marriage are also associated with underemployment and unemployment. People today marry later and may experience a period of cohabitation prior to marriage (Barich and Bielby, 1996). The reasons for the trend toward marital delay probably include increased opportunities for nonmarital sexual intercourse and increased acceptance of nonmarital cohabitation (Cooney and Hogan, 1991; Miller and Heaton, 1991).

This trend is significant because those who wait until they are in their middle or late twenties to marry have a greater chance of marital success than do those who marry earlier. In fact, one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of the

**Figure 1.2**    Median Age at First Marriage, by Sex: 1890 to 1999 (*Note:* Data from *Vital Statistics of the United States* by U.S. National Center for Health Statistics [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services], annual, 1890–1999, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office; *Monthly Vital Statistics Report* by U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, monthly, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office; and *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1999* [Table 158, p. 111] by U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.)



propensity to divorce is the age at which persons marry. Virtually every study of marital dissolution undertaken since the late 1960s has found both spouses' age at marriage to be statistically significant with respect to the probability of divorce (South, 1995). The delay of marriage also has resulted in a marked increase in unmarried young adults in the population. One-half of the men (51%) and over one-third of the women (38.6%) in the country still have not married by 30 years of age (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999). This is due to a decline in negative attitudes toward remaining single, a longer life expectancy, smaller families, and more career options for women (Thornton, 1989). See Chapter 4 for a complete discussion.

### Birthrates and Family Size

The birthrate in the United States climbed very rapidly after 1945 and stayed high for the next 20 years. This **cohort,** known as the baby boomers, was larger than any that had been born since the years before the 1910s and 1920s. At the present time, birthrates are on the decline. Birthrates for all groups have fallen to their lowest level since 1986 (Hollander, 1997a). Declining birthrates since 1965 have resulted in smaller families. The average number of persons per family was 3.67 in 1960 and 3.18 in 1999. Figure 1.3 shows the change in the average population per family from 1960 to 1999.

As you can see in Figure 1.4, 52% of White families in 1999 had no children of their own under 18 years of age at home. An additional 20% of White families had only one child of their own at home who was under 18 years of age. Higher percentages of both Black and Hispanic families had greater numbers of children. The birthrate continues to be higher for most minority groups because of cultural differences and different employment opportunities; this trend will be discussed more in Chapter 3.

Seventy-two percent of White families had only one or no children under 18 at home. Among Black families, the figure was 65%. These figures reflect the fact that American women of all races are having fewer children. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the average married woman had five children. By the end of the century, the average number of total births to ever-married women between the ages of 15 and 55 had declined to 1.8.

The decline in family size can be attributed to several factors. Until the twentieth century, women were expected to "be fruitful and multiply." Large families were considered not only a blessing but also an economic asset: More hands were available to work the family farm. Furthermore, reliable birth control methods were largely unavailable. In fact, in 1873, Congress enacted the "Comstock Law," which imposed heavy fines and long prison terms for sending information on contraceptives through the mail. Twenty-four states passed additional statutes that banned advertisements for and the publication and
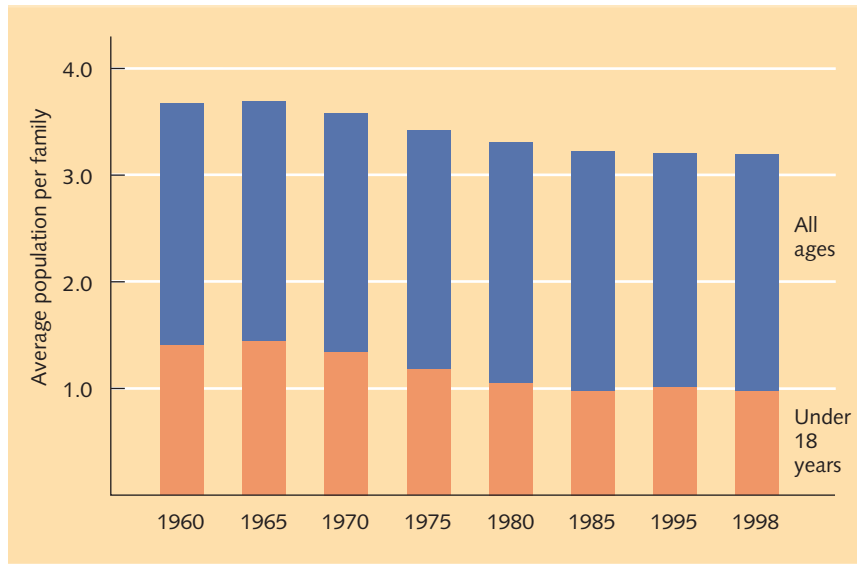
**Figure 1.3** Average Population per Family, 1960–1998 (*Note:* Data from *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1999* [Table 70, p. 60] by U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.)



**Figure 1.4** Percent Distribution of Families, by Number of Own Children Under 18 Years Old and by Ethnic Group, 1998 (*Note:* Data from *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1999* [Table 79, p. 65] by U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.)
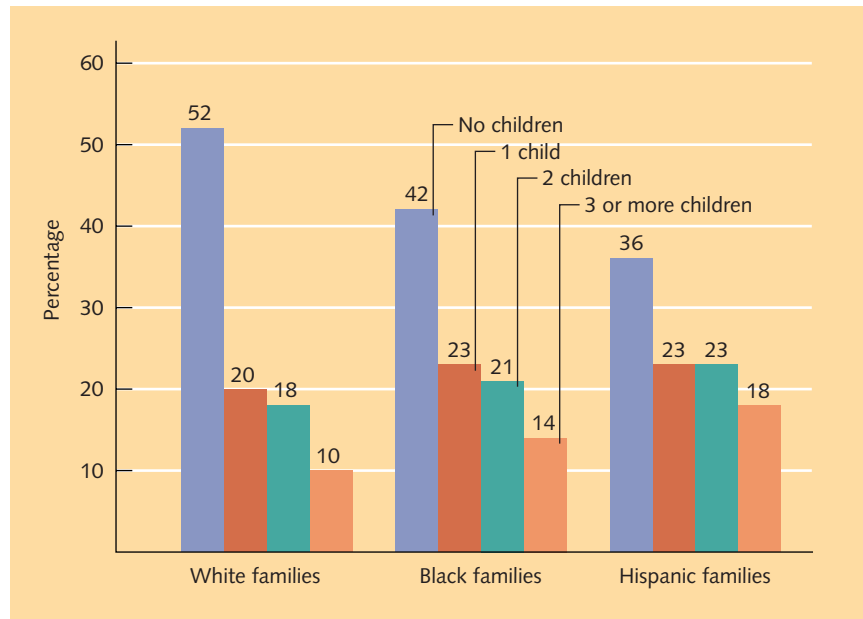
distribution of information on contraceptives. Another 14 states made it illegal for anyone, including physicians, to provide information about contraception.

As families moved from farms to the city, large numbers of children became a financial burden, so it became economically expedient for women to have fewer children (Margolis, 1984). Also, women began to work in factories and offices and could not

take care of large families. At the same time, more efficient means of contraception became available, and couples were more willing to use them. Federal and state laws prohibiting the dispensing of contraceptive information and methods were gradually repealed. When married women began a massive movement into the world of work, the birthrate decreased even more.

## Working Mothers

Another important change in family living has been the large influx of married women into the workforce (Floge, 1989). Until the early 1980s, married women with no children under age 18 had higher labor force participation rates than did those with children under age 6. This long-standing pattern began to change during the 1980s and has now reversed. In 1998, married women whose youngest child was between ages 6 and 17 had the highest labor force participation rates (76.8%; see Figure 1.5). Sixty-four percent of married women with the youngest child under age 6 also were employed. This represents a larger percentage than that of married women without children under 18 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999a). This trend will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 12.

Research has revealed some demographic, social, and attitudinal differences between married women who work outside the home and those who do not. Those who do not are more likely to hold traditional attitudes regarding marital roles, mothers' employment outside the home, and sexuality. Married women who are not employed full-time have more children and live in households with less income. Married women who are employed full-time are better educated and have fewer children and more income than married women who are not employed (Glass, 1992). There has also been a marked increase in the proportion of highly educated women who convert their professional training into paid employment (Cooney and Uhlenberg, 1991).

Mothers are entering the workforce for reasons both economic and noneconomic. The major reason is financial need: Many families simply can't make it financially without both parents working. Factors such as inflation, the high cost of living, and the desire for a higher standard of living pressure families to have two incomes. Employment opportunities for women have also increased.

Noneconomic reasons for employment are important as well. Large numbers of women want to work for reasons of personal fulfillment. For many, this is the primary motive.

These trends have only added to women's burdens. Most working wives now try to meet the usual demands for housework and family care in addition to working full-time outside the home. Generally, research indicates that the wife's employment has only a minimal effect on the husband's household responsibilities. Women's satisfaction is greatly enhanced when husbands are willing to assume a fair share of the total responsibilities (Scanzoni, 1987).

Increased employment for mothers has intensified the demand for child care. Eighty-eight percent of mothers working 35 or more hours a week use nonparental child care for their children under 6 years of age (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999a). This includes both group care in centers and baby-sitting by relatives or nonrelatives.

## One-Parent Families

One of the most far-reaching changes since the 1970s has been the increase in the number of families that consist of a single parent maintaining a household with one or more children. The high rates of separation and divorce, as well as the increased number of births to single women, have contributed to the large increase in this family type.

In 1998, nearly 1 out of every 3 families (27.7%) with children under age 18 was a one-parent family, up from 1 in 10 in 1970. The number of one-parent families tripled between 1970 and 1998 (from 4 million to 12 million; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999a). Among one-parent families, 2.1 million were headed by fathers, and 9.8 million were headed by mothers, 42.2% of whom were never married.

Eighty-five percent of one-parent families in 1998 were mother-child families. The older the parent (and the children), the more likely the father is to maintain a one-parent family with his children. Boys are more likely than girls to be living with fathers. However, mother-child families are disproportionately concentrated among African Americans because of high rates of unemployment and underemployment of Black males; this pattern will be discussed further in Chapter 3. Fifty-eight percent of all Black children under 18 are currently living with only their mother, compared with 23% of all White children and 30% of Hispanic children under 18.

Statistics for a particular year fail to show the true extent of one-parent families (Hofferth, 1985). Cross-sectional studies show only the percentages of one-parent families during the year of the survey, not the total number that have ever been one-parent families. According to projections, nearly 60% of all children born in 1986 can expect to spend at least a large part of one year in a one-parent family before reaching the age of 18 (Norton and Glick,
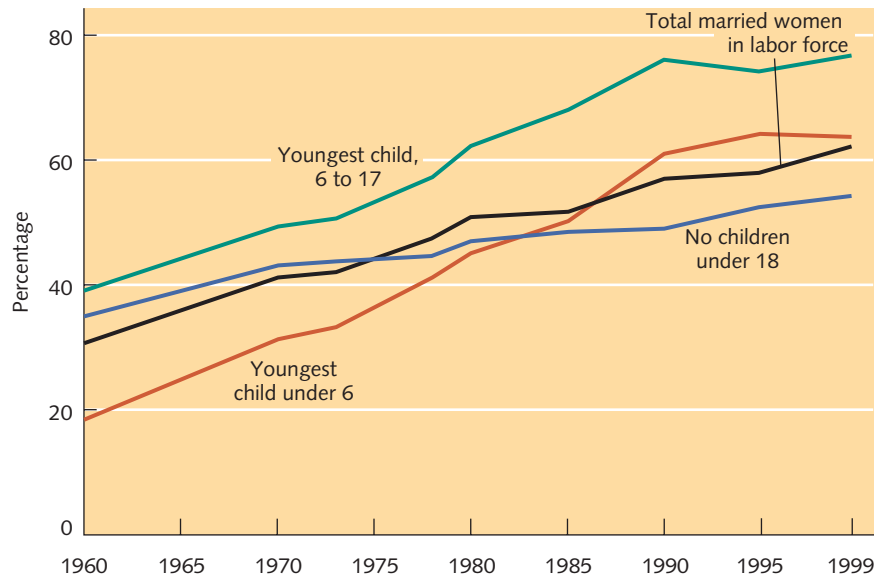
**Figure 1.5**  Labor Force Participation Rates of Married Women, by Presence of Children and Age of Youngest Child, 1998 (*Note:* Data from *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1999* [Table 659, p. 417] by U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.)

1986). The effects on mothers and on children are discussed in detail in Chapter 17.

## Gay and Lesbian Families

This discussion would not be complete without including gay or lesbian families. Researchers have become increasingly interested in the same-sex relationship form.

As in any family type, there is a wide diversity of gay and lesbian life-styles. Many same-sex couple relationships are of short duration, and a pattern of serial monogamy is common. However, a large number of gays and lesbians have made long-term commitments in stable couple relationships (Masters and Johnson, 1979). Although only a few states have legitimized same-sex marriage, marriagelike liaisons are increasingly accepted by society.

Reverend Philip Zwerling, a California clergyman, wrote:

> I had never married two people of the same sex. I finally realized that their sexual orientation did not lessen their commitment to each other, or their love for each other. I cannot now predict the future of their relationship, but I do believe that they freely chose what both believe best for them.
>
> Gay people have the same desire for happiness in our society as heterosexuals. And one of those desires is the chance . . . to create a marital relationship of depth and love. (Zwerling, 1989)

Gays and lesbians are fighting harder than ever before for the right to legally marry. Public support for marriage equality continues to grow, but 30 states and Congress have passed laws that allow them to refuse to honor gay marriages in the event that a state court permits them. By passing some form of antimarriage law, states have sanctioned public policy discriminating against lesbian and gay couples. However, some states have adopted more progressive policies regarding gay and lesbian marriages. For example, the Vermont Supreme Court in December 1999 ordered the state legislature to extend to lesbian and gay couples the same rights, protections, benefits, and obligations available to nongay couples through marriage. While the court held that all the benefits and protections of marriage must be made equally available, the justices explicitly did not rule on whether to allow lesbian and gay couples access to civil marriage.

Many cities and businesses are now recognizing gay and lesbian couples as domestic partners and extending benefits commonly granted only to married couples. Although these laws and policies do not include all of the rights of marriage, they generally grant partners some of the recognition and benefits extended to married couples. The benefits vary depending on city and company but typically include the right to visit a sick or dying partner in the hospital, sick leave to care for a partner, bereavement

It is estimated that between 1 and 5 million lesbians in the United States are biological or adoptive mothers. These figures, however, probably underestimate the actual numbers. Because of fear of discrimination and contests over child custody, lesbian and gay parents are sometimes reluctant to make their sexual orientation known.

Most children in families headed by lesbian mothers were born into the context of a heterosexual relationship between the biological parents. After leaving the heterosexual relationship, some mothers eventually enter a relationship with another woman who may or may not act as a stepparent to the children. If both women are parents, the children may form stepsibling relationships with one another.

Some single lesbians, as well as lesbian couples, conceive children through artificial insemination. Lesbians who want to become mothers through artificial insemination may select a friend, relative, or acquaintance to be the sperm donor, or they may choose to use an anonymous donor.

In one study, researchers interviewed 28 lesbian couples with 51 children (Hare and Richards, 1993). Half of the families had one child; the remainder had between two and eight children. The children's ages ranged from 4 months to 23 years, with a mean of 9.6 years. Thirty-six children (70%) were conceived heterosexually. Eleven (22%) were conceived through artificial insemination using either known or unknown donors. Four (8%) were adopted by one of the women in the couple. In 72% of the families, the mother had full custody of the children; in 18% of the families, there was joint mother-father custody; and in 10% of the families, the father had full custody.

The involvement of biological fathers ranged from low to moderate and tended to vary over time, with some fathers increasing and others decreasing contact with children. The mothers were very supportive of the fathers' involvement, and they felt that the more involvement, the better for the child. Four or five children were conceived using a known donor; two of the donor fathers were moderately involved, visiting the child once a week. The role of the donor with respect to the child was primarily that of a family friend or male role model. He was acknowledged as "your father" but did not act as an authority figure or parent.

Most women who elected to use an unknown donor still believed that a male role model was important for their children, although not all mothers had been able to identify such a person for their child. One couple asked the husband of a long-time friend to serve as their son's godfather. They reported that this had been a very positive relationship for the child. Of the four adopted children, one had a highly involved surrogate father who lived across the street and saw him daily. The other adopted children had no surrogate father or male role model during the study time period.

The involvement of lesbian partners in the lives of the children varied considerably. In all cases, the birth mother assumed ultimate parental authority for her own child. No children in this group referred to the partner as "mother"; all called the partner by her first name. When both women in the couple were birth mothers, child-care responsibilities were shared to a greater extent than when only one woman was a birth mother. In families in which only one of the women was the birth mother, the partner tended to assume the role of friend and ally of the child. A clear distinction was made between partner and mother in terms of parental authority. Overall, the relationships were very positive; however, some strain was reported between the partner and adolescent children. This was true even when the partner had joined the family when the children were very young.

Families formed by lesbian mothers are described as closely resembling heterosexual stepfamilies. As with heterosexual families, it appears that, when children are born or adopted outside the context of a current relationship, all relationships require adjustment in terms of new roles and responsibilities (Hare and Richards, 1993).

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leave to attend a partner's funeral, housing rights such as rent control, and health insurance.

Many gays and lesbians are parents of children who were born during previous heterosexual unions. In the 1990s, many gays and lesbians also used artificial insemination and adoption as avenues to parenthood. There are an estimated 2–6 million gay or lesbian parents, who have 6–14 million children (Patterson, 1992). One of the problems in obtaining more exact numbers is that discrimination still exists, and so many gay and lesbian parents keep their sexual identity relatively hidden. Child custody can be denied if a parent's homosexuality can be proven to adversely affect the child (Patterson and Redding, 1996). Indeed, fear of losing their children is often the biggest barrier to gays' and lesbians' openly declaring their sexual orientation. During custody cases, the courts often are concerned with several issues surrounding the social and psychological development of children being raised by gay or lesbian parents. These include concerns that the parents' homosexuality will

adversely affect the child's gender and emotional development, that social stigma or peer rejection will result due to parental homosexuality, and that there is an increased likelihood of the child becoming homosexual (Fitzgerald, 1999). However, the studies that have been conducted on children who grow up in gay and lesbian families show that they develop in a positive manner psychologically, intellectually, behaviorally, and emotionally. They have no greater incidence of homosexuality than do children who grow up in a heterosexual family, and the presence of a heterosexual parent of each gender is not crucial to healthy child development (see Fitzgerald, 1999, for a review of the literature).

### Grandparents as Parents

One notable trend in the evolution of the family in recent decades is the dramatic increase in the number of children living in grandparent-maintained households. In 1970, 2.2 million children under age 18 lived in their grandparents' home, with or without parents present; by 1998, that number had grown to almost 4 million (Casper and Bryson, 1998). When these households are categorized by the presence of parents, it becomes evident that the greatest increases have occurred in households in which one parent is also residing in the home. Between 1970 and 1997, households in which the mother was present increased by 118 percent, and households in which the father was present increased by 217 percent (see Figure 1.6). Research has indicated that possible reasons for this trend include an increase in drug use among parents, higher rates of teen pregnancy or divorce, the rapid rise in single-parent households, AIDS, child abuse and neglect, and incarceration of parents (Minkler, 1998).

The arrangement of grandparent as caregiver has benefits and drawbacks, for both grandparents and children. Grandparents may experience a greater sense of purpose for living, a renewed vitality, and a feeling of rejuvenation (Kleiner, Hertzog, and Targ, 1998). They may relish the opportunity to raise a child differently or to nurture family relationships, and they may be rewarded with love and companionship they did not have previously with the grandchild (Burton, Dilworth-Anderson, and Merriwether-de-Vries, 1995).

Children may also benefit from living in grandparent-maintained households. Compared to children in single-parent households, children being raised solely by their grandparents are healthier, have fewer behavioral problems, and are better adapted socially (Solomon and Marx, 1995). And compared to children in foster care, those in grandparent-maintained households may be less traumatized, enjoy the continuation of family identity and culture or ethnicity, and maintain a connection to their siblings (Bell and Garner, 1996).

Much of the research, however, puts more emphasis on the apparent negative effects on grandparents and children in these households. Economic difficulties are prevalent in grandparent-maintained households. Twenty-seven percent of children who live with their grandparents are in poverty, and if the grandmother is raising the children alone, almost two-thirds of the children are living in poverty. Both numbers are significantly greater than the 19 percent of children in poverty who live with their parents (Casper and Bryson, 1998). Figure 1.7 shows the comparison. Grandparents may even be penalized for their willingness to care for their grandchildren, being denied foster-parent benefits because of their blood relation to the children (Kleiner et al., 1998).

Some grandparents also experience increased health problems and loss of stamina. Many report feeling emotionally and physically drained from having to care for their grandchildren (Kleiner et al., 1998). Other drawbacks include loss of time for themselves that they had rediscovered after their own children left home, isolation from their social networks, and resentment based on jealousy and role confusion on the part of other grandchildren and family members (Kleiner et al., 1998).

Aside from being poor, children living with their grandparents are more likely to be living with caregivers who have not graduated from high school: one-third of children in grandparent-headed households versus one-eighth of children in parent-headed households (Casper and Bryson, 1998). Another negative consequence for children in grandparent-maintained households is a lack of health insurance. Fifty-six percent of children residing with both grandparents, with no parent present, are uninsured, compared to 13% of children living with both parents (Bryson and Casper, 1999).

Given the increase in the number of grandparents raising their grandchildren and the impact this arrangement has on both caregiver and child, the

**Figure 1.6**    Grandchildren in Grandparents' Homes by Presence of Parents, 1970–1997 (*Note:* Data from Bureau of the Census, 1970 and 1980, and "Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1994" [Table A-6] and "Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1997" [Table 4] by U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Surveys, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.)
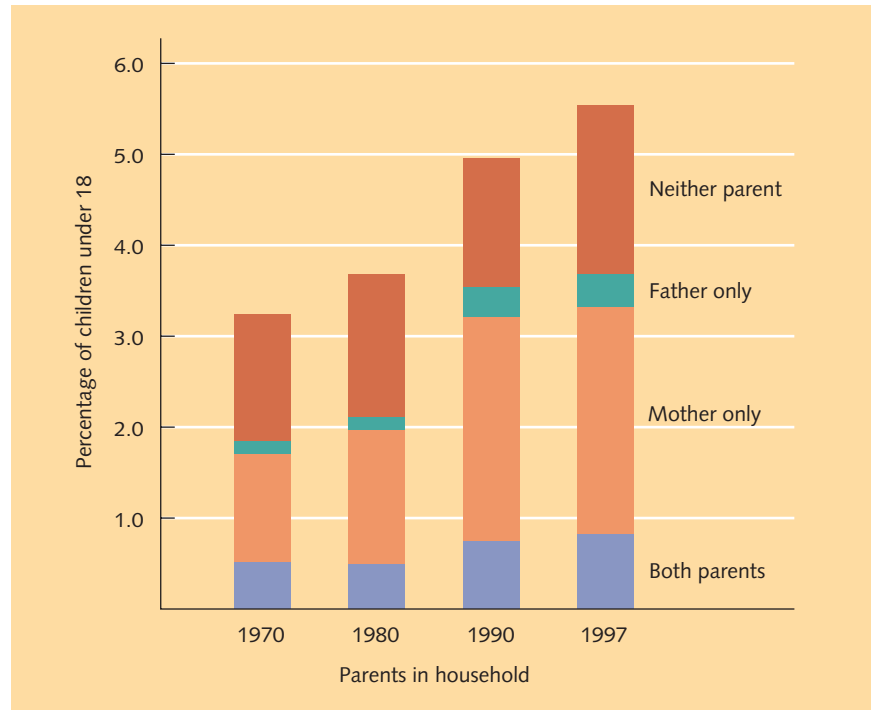


government and the community likely are going to be called upon to provide more support. Policies and programs intended for traditional and foster families could be extended to these families as well, and employers of grandparents remaining in the workforce will expect subsidized child-care and family-friendly policies (Casper and Bryson, 1998).

## CHANGES IN DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

One of the most dramatic changes in family life in the past generation has been the increase in the rate of divorce and remarriage and the number of stepfamilies (Bray and Hetherington, 1993). In recent years, rates of divorce and remarriage have declined slightly, but they are still at a relatively high level.

### Divorce Rates

Divorce rates increased steadily from 1958 until 1979, but since then they have declined slightly (see Figure 1.8). In 1998, 19.4 million adults were currently divorced, representing 9.8% of the popula-

tion. Most scholars believe that the divorce rate has stabilized, with about 50% of new marriages likely to end in divorce. Certainly, there has been a decline in the belief in the ideal of marital permanence, which may have contributed to the increase in marital failure (Glenn, 1991).

### Remarriage Trends

The majority of people who divorce eventually remarry. The National Center for Health Statistics estimates that two-thirds of the people who get divorced will eventually marry again (Clarke, 1995). Furthermore, remarriage happens fairly quickly. The median number of years between divorce and remarriage is 3 years for women and 4 years for men (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996/1997). Whites remarry more quickly than African Americans, with Latinos the least likely to remarry of the three groups (Coleman and Ganong, 1991; Tiesel and Olson, 1992). These remarriage rates will be discussed in subsequent chapters. However, since the early 1990s, the proportion who remarry appears to be declining. Redivorce rates for remarried persons also show signs of decline, so future rates
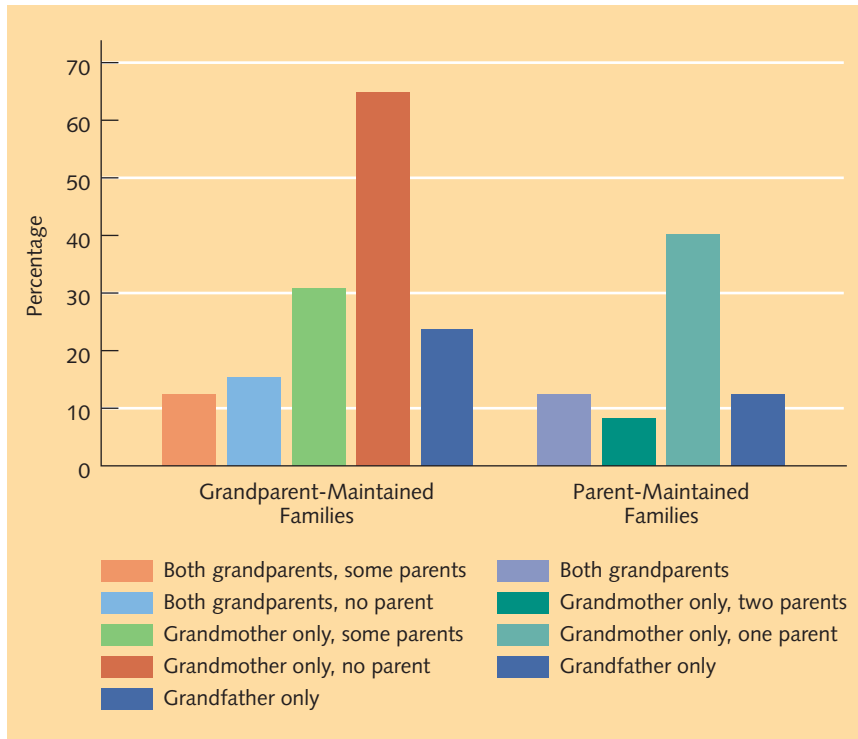
**Figure 1.7** Percentage of Children in Different Family Types Who Are in Poverty, 1997 (*Note:* Data from "Coresident Grandparents and Grandchildren" [p. 8] by K. Bryson and L. M. Casper, 1999, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 168, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.)
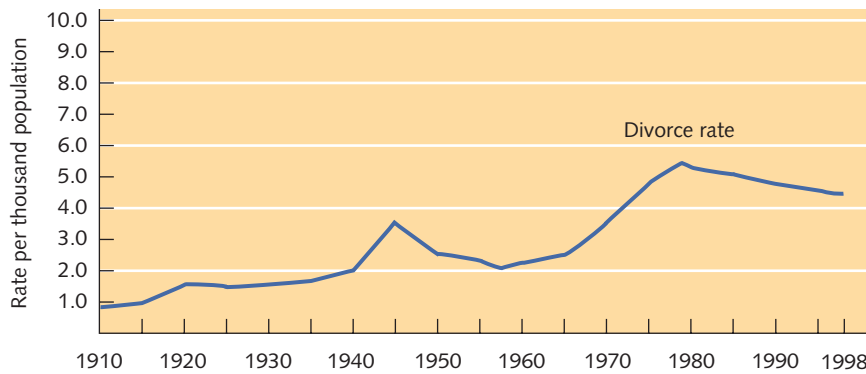


**Figure 1.8** Divorce Rates, 1910–1998 (*Note:* Data from *Vital Statistics of the United States* by National Center for Health Statistics [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services], annual, 1910–1998, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.)

of redivorce may be quite similar to those of first divorce. This may be due to economic factors, as in the case of divorced men who are paying child support and are reluctant to assume financial responsibility for another family. However, the incidence of divorce in the United States remains among the highest in the world. The net effect of a high rate of divorce and remarriage is an increase in reconstituted, or blended, families.

## Blended Families

Overall, about 46% of American marriages are remarriages for the husband, wife, or both (Clarke, 1995). When a parent remarries and brings children from a previous marriage into the new family unit, a blended, or reconstituted, family is formed. If the couple has children together, the blended family may consist of children from her previous marriage,

**Figure 1.9**   Age of First Intercourse, by Ethnic Group and Sex, 1992 (*Note:* From *Sex in America* [p. 91] by R. T. Michael, J. H. Gagnon, E. O. Laumann, and G. Kolata, 1994, Boston: Little, Brown.)
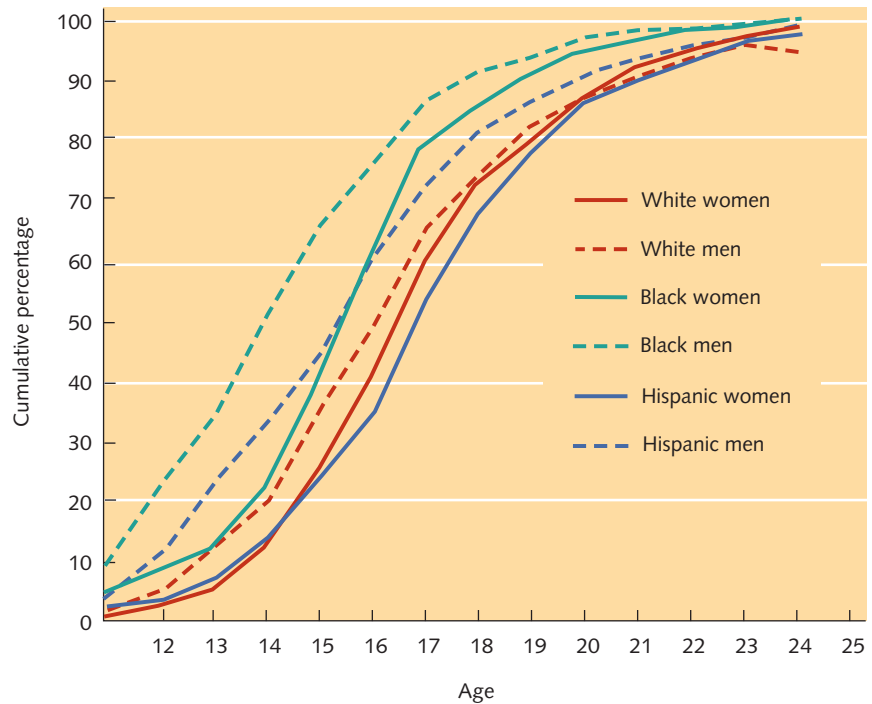


children from his previous marriage, and children born to them since they married each other.

Family relationships in a blended family can become quite complicated, because each parent faces the challenge of forming new relationships with stepchildren, with the children of the new marriage, and perhaps with the spouse's ex-spouse. The children face the challenge of adjusting to stepparents and to stepsiblings, as well as maintaining relationships with natural parents both inside and outside their new family unit. If both their natural parents remarry, the children must adjust to two stepparents and to any stepsiblings in their newly constituted families. Also, both parents and children may have to form new relationships with other relatives on both sides of the families. In short, obviously, many adjustments are required. See Chapter 21 for a detailed discussion of remarriage and stepparenting.

## CHANGES IN NONMARITAL SEXUAL BEHAVIOR
### Sexual Activity

Researchers have reported significant changes in attitudes toward and behaviors associated with nonmarital sexual activity over the past 40 years. A comprehensive survey conducted in 1992, called the National Health and Social Life Survey, is based on 3,432 interviews with people across the United States. These respondents answered a 90-minute questionnaire about their sexual behavior and other aspects of their sex lives (Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, and Kolata, 1994). One of the trends that the results revealed was, with a few exceptions, a steadily declining age at which people first had sexual intercourse. Men reported first having sex at a younger age than did women, and Blacks reported doing so at a younger age than did Whites.

Another way to look at the age of first intercourse is illustrated in Figure 1.9, which shows the age at which teenagers and young adults first experienced sexual intercourse. The graph shows that half of all Black men have had intercourse by age 15, half of all Hispanic men by age 16½, and half of all White men by age 17. Half of all Black women have had intercourse by age 17, and half of all White and Hispanic women have had intercourse by about age 18. By age 22, about 90% of each group have had intercourse (Heaton and Jacobson, 1994).

When asked why they had intercourse the first time, 51% of the men said curiosity and readiness for sex, and 25% said affection for their partner. Among the women, it was the reverse: About half said affec-

Efforts have been made to identify those students who engage in high-risk sexual behavior in order to decrease the rate of teenage pregnancy and to slow the spread of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. Such behavior includes substance abuse, sex with multiple partners, and condom nonuse.

Students who use marijuana, cocaine, and other illicit drugs are more likely than students who report no substance abuse to have had sexual intercourse and to have had four or more sexual partners; they are also less likely to have used condoms during intercourse. Students who report no substance abuse are least likely to have ever had intercourse or to have had four or more partners (Lowry et al., 1994).

Unmarried American women who have first intercourse when they are younger than age 17 are more likely than other women to have had more than one sexual partner (Seidman, Mosher, and Aral, 1994). Female adolescents who receive little parental supervision are more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior than adolescents who talk more with their parents about birth control. They have more partners and use contraceptives unreliably (Luster and Small, 1994). High-risk sexually active females have a lower mean grade point average than do low-risk sexually active females. Likewise, average alcohol consumption is significantly higher among high-risk young women (Luster and Small). High-risk females are also significantly more likely to have been physically abused than are low-risk teenagers (Donovan, 1995). Males who engage in sexual risk taking are more likely than others to contemplate suicide and to have been sexually abused (Luster and Small).

Maternal disapproval of premarital sex, maternal discussions about birth control, and the quality of the parent-child relationship may have an important influence on male and female adolescent sexual activity and on the consistency of adolescents' contraceptive use (Jaccard, Dittus, and Gordon, 1996).

Both boys and girls are significantly more likely to become sexually active before age 14 if their mother had sex at an early age and if she has worked extensively outside the home (Mott, Fondell, Hu, Kowaleski-Jones, and Menaghan, 1996). Data gathered from 2,168 male and female adolescents in grades 7, 9, and 11 showed that the six strongest predictors of sexual experience were frequent use of alcohol, involvement in a committed relationship, low parental monitoring, permissive parental values, low grade point average, and a history of sexual abuse (Small and Luster, 1994).

Social control factors have an important influence on sexual behavior. For example, religious control systems act as a powerful deterrent to adolescent sexuality in terms of both attitudes and behavior. Data from a national probability sample of single female adolescents, ages 15–19, indicated that geographic mobility was partly related to premarital sex. Migration may lower control, resulting in greater sexual experience (Stack, 1994).

Having both sexually active girlfriends and an adolescent childbearing sister had strong effects on permissive sexual attitudes of adolescent girls (East, Felice, and Morgan, 1993). Maternal conservative attitudes about sex and the presence of dating rules that were enforced delayed development of sexual behavior in male and female White and Latino adolescents (Hovell, Sipan, Blumberg, Atkins, Hofstetter, and Kreigner, 1994).

tion for their partner, and about 25% said curiosity and readiness for sex. A very small percentage of both men and women said they had sex because of a desire for physical pleasure. Most of the men said they were not in love with their first sexual partner; most of the women, in contrast, said they were.

Today, American teenagers are having sex earlier than their parents did, but they do not necessarily have more partners. About half of today's young adults begin having intercourse with a partner ages 15–18, and at least four out of five have had intercourse by the time they are 21. Given that the average age of marriage is now the mid-twenties, few Americans are waiting until they marry to have sex. But most sexually active young people show no signs of having large numbers of partners. More than half of the men and women between ages 18 and 24 in 1992 had had just one sex partner in the past year, and 11% had had none.

The National Health and Social Life Survey gives no support to the idea of a promiscuous society or of a dramatic sexual revolution in which large numbers of people have multiple, casual sex partners. Instead, the survey indicates that most people form partnerships and ultimately get married. And no matter how sexually active people are before and between marriages, and no matter whether they live with a sexual partner before marriage or they are virgins on their wedding day, the vast majority, once married, have no other sexual partner; their past is essentially erased. Marriage remains the great leveler (Michael et al., 1994).

**17**

### The Use of Contraceptives

People in a high-risk category—those who have more than one partner, especially if they do not know them well, and those who have the most frequent sexual relationships—need to use condoms consistently to protect against sexually transmitted diseases, especially AIDS. According to the National Health and Social Life Survey, nearly half the people in the high-risk category never use condoms during vaginal intercourse with their primary partner or a secondary partner (see Figure 1.10). Nevertheless, perhaps because they want to protect their spouse or lover from infection and because they recognize the riskiness of their behavior, people who have several sex partners in a year are more likely to use a condom with their primary partner and with their secondary partners than are people who have only one other partner.

### Unmarried Pregnancy

The marked increase in nonmarital sexual activity, accompanied by an inefficient use of contraceptives, the lesbian baby boom, and more single women deciding to have children, has resulted in an increase in unmarried pregnancy. However, the teen birthrate has declined 20% since 1991, from 62.1 per 1,000 females ages 15–19 to 49.6 (Curtin and Martin, 2000). The total number of live births to unmarried women of all groups increased from 827,420 in 1985 to 1,260,000 in 1996 (see Figure 1.11). The nonmarital birthrate peaked in 1994, with 47 births per 1,000 females, and then declined to 44 births per 1,000 females (National Center for Health Statistics, 1999).

## THEORIES TO HELP EXPLAIN FAMILY BEHAVIOR

As rational creatures, we seek explanations. When a husband and wife divorce, for instance, family and friends look for answers to a variety of questions: What happened? Why are they getting a divorce? What agreements will be made? What will happen to them and the children after it's all over?

There are dozens of theories related to intimate relationships, marriages, and families. Theories have been formulated to explain why people are attracted to one another, why people fall in love, why people select the mates they do, how gender roles develop, how families make decisions, what causes sexual dysfunctions, how to raise children, and what causes divorce and remarriage.

Here we are interested in theories related to the family itself. According to scientific methods, theory building is a process of formulating a problem, collecting data to aid in solving the problem, developing a hypothesis, testing it, and then drawing conclusions, which are stated in the form of a theory. A **theory** is a tentative explanation of facts and data that have been observed (Klein and White, 1996).
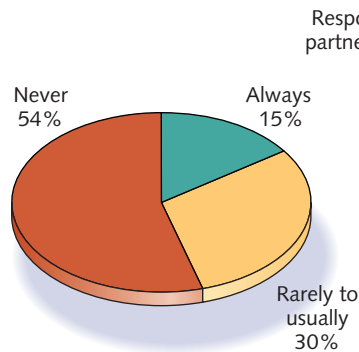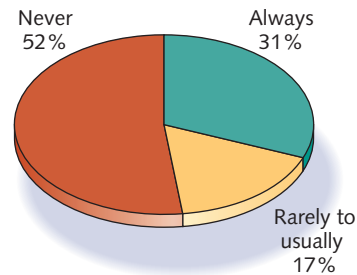
Psychologists and sociologists have formulated a number of theories about the family (Holman and Burr, 1980). Seven important ones have been selected for discussion here: structural-functional theory, family developmental theory, symbolic interaction theory, systems theory, exchange theory, conflict theory, and feminist theory.

### Structural-Functional Theory

**Structural-functional theory** looks at the family as a social institution and asks, How is the family organized, and what functions does it serve in meeting society's needs? When talking about the family, structural-functionalists usually refer to the nuclear family. From this point of view, the family is considered successful to the extent that it fulfills societal expectations and needs.

Family functions have been described in numerous ways. A generation ago, Murdock (1949) identified four basic functions of the nuclear family: providing a common residence, economic cooperation, reproduction, and sex. Since Murdock's time, the nuclear family has become much less common, and some of the functions he identified are not necessarily confined to the family. In an attempt to provide an even more basic definition of the family, sociologists and family theorists have proposed other functions. However, Murdock's four are a good place to start discussing the family's role in society.

**Common Residence**    In recent decades, changes in society have created many variations of this function. In commuter marriages, for example, spouses maintain separate residences for much of the time, seeing each other only on weekends or occasionally during the month. Today, family members may share

**Condom Use with Primary Partner**

**Condom Use with Secondary Partner**

Respondent had two sex
partners in past 12 months

Never
54%

Always
15%

Rarely to
usually
30%
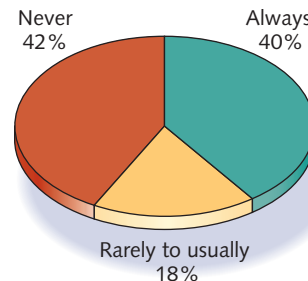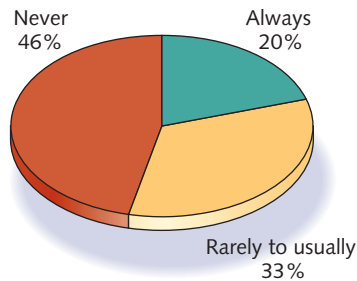
Never
52%

Always
31%

Rarely to
usually
17%

**Figure 1.10** Frequency of
Condom Use over the Past
12 Months with Primary and
Secondary Sex Partners, 1992
(*Note:* From *Sex in America* [p. 197]
by R. T. Michael, J. H. Gagnon, E.
O. Laumann, and G. Kolata, 1994,
Boston: Little, Brown.)

Respondent had three or more
sex partners in past 12 months

Never
46%

Always
20%

Rarely to usually
33%

Never
42%

Always
40%

Rarely to usually
18%

a common residence only some of the time, but they still form a family.

**Economic Cooperation**   Economic cooperation is a broad concept that can include a wide range of activities, from cooking, to maintaining a household, to earning an income. It includes the production, allocation, distribution, and management of resources such as money, material goods, food, drink, services, skills, care, time, and space.

Historically, the family was almost a self-sufficient economic unit. The traditional rural family produced much of its own food, housing, and clothing. Family members cooperated in this production and depended on one another for goods and services.

During and after the industrial revolution, many families moved off the family farm and came to depend more on those outside the family for the production of goods and services. As families became consumers rather than producers, earning an income became even more necessary. Partly because of increasing demands for income, wives as well as

husbands were enlisted in the task of providing a living. Thus, spouses become mutually dependent in fulfilling this task.

The economic functions of the family are still important, but the nuclear family has never been able to meet all of them. Some needs have been met by other groups. For example, insurance companies provide health and life insurance, and industries and the Social Security Administration provide pensions for the retired or disabled.

**Reproduction**   Although the reproductive function of the family has always been important, nonmarital reproduction is now common as well. Births to unmarried women now constitute one-fourth of all live births (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999a). Advances in reproductive technology—in vitro fertilization, for example—have made it possible for fertilization to take place without any sexual contact between a man and a woman.

**Sexual Functions**   Murdock's concept of sexuality was synonymous with heterosexual relationships

**Figure 1.11**    Births to Unmarried Women, by Ethnic Origin, as a Percentage of Total Live Births, 1998 (*Note:* Data from "Births: Final Data for 1998" [Tables 13 and 14] by S. J. Ventura, J. A. Martin, S. C. Curtin, T. J. Mathews, and M. M. Park, 2000, *National Vital Statistics Report, 48*(3), Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.)
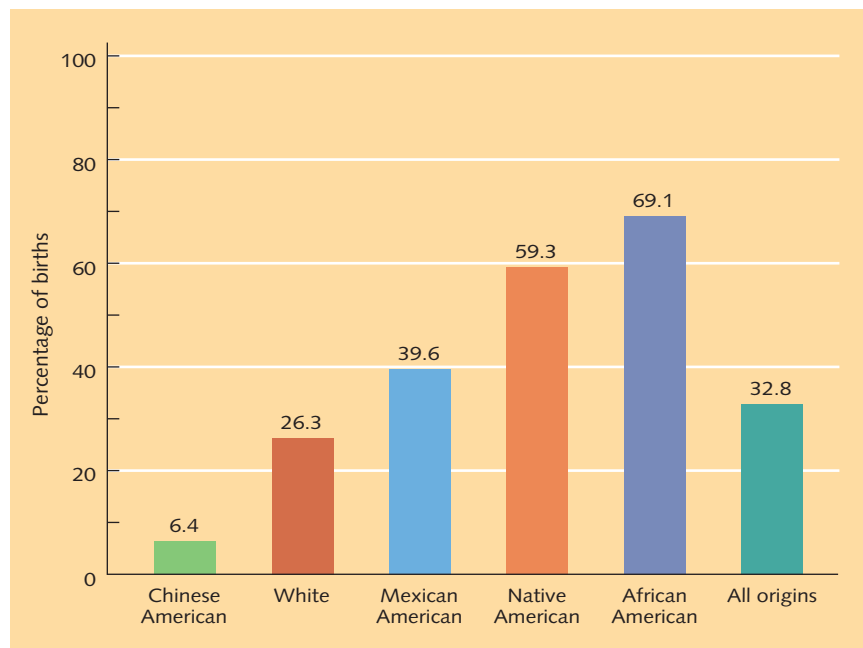


within the family. Obviously, sexual expression, both heterosexual and homosexual, may take place between two people outside a family unit. Some gay and lesbian couples have children from previous heterosexual relationships or have been able to legally adopt children, and some lesbians have given birth.

**Nurture and Socialization of Children**    Sociologists have described other family functions. Reiss (1980) insists that the only universal function of the family (nuclear, extended, or otherwise) is the nurturance and socialization of children. According to this view, parents do not have to be biologically related to their children (the children may be adopted), but society insists that socialization is the responsibility of the family group (Moss and Abramowitz, 1982). Whether parents are single, separated, divorced, married, or remarried, they are expected to be responsible for meeting their children's physical, emotional, social, intellectual, and moral needs. The family is not the only caregiving or socialization unit. Schools, churches, and social groups such as the Cub Scouts, Brownies, Girl and Boy Scouts, and YMCA participate in the socialization process (Hoge, Petrillo, and Smith, 1982). But society delegates to the family primary responsibility for this process. Failure to meet this function constitutes legal grounds for charges of child ne-

glect or abuse. Additional information on the socialization of children may be found in Chapter 17 on parenting.

### Family Developmental Theory

**Family developmental theory** includes two basic concepts. The first is that of the family life cycle, which divides the family experience into phases, or stages, over the life span and describes changes in family structure and roles during each stage. The traditional family life cycle is an early marriage (with no children), years devoted to childbearing and child rearing, empty-nest years, retirement, and the death of one's spouse and widowhood. Chapter 11 discusses the family life cycle in more detail.

The second concept is that of developmental tasks, which Duvall (1977) defines as growth responsibilities that arise at certain stages in the life of the family. The successful completion of these tasks leads to immediate satisfaction and approval, as well as to success with later tasks. In contrast, failure leads to unhappiness in the family, disapproval of society, and difficulty with later developmental tasks. Examples of developmental tasks are the need to develop parenting skills when a child is born and the need to make adjustments at the time of retirement. For the family to continue to grow, biological requirements, cultural imperatives, and

*Families exist in a variety of forms, but the nuclear family is still much in evidence. Its most enduring function may be the care and guidance of children.*

personal aspirations need to be satisfied during each stage of the family life cycle.

To be successful, family members need to adapt to the changing needs and demands of other family members and the changing expectations of the larger kin network, the community, and society. Family members also need to attend to tasks that are necessary to ensure family survival. Family tasks can be grouped into five categories: (1) physical maintenance, (2) socialization for roles inside and outside the family, (3) maintenance of family morale and motivation to perform tasks, (4) social

control, and (5) the acquisition of family members (through birth or adoption) and their launching when mature (Mattessich and Hill, 1987). Chapter 11 provides a more detailed discussion of developmental tasks over the family life cycle.

## Symbolic Interaction Theory

**Symbolic interaction theory** describes the family as a unity of interacting personalities (Stryker, 1972; Turner, 1970). It focuses attention on the way that family members interact through symbols:

words, gestures, rules, and roles. People are socialized to understand the meaning of various symbols and to use them to communicate messages, feelings, intentions, and actions. Family members interact through symbols, and together they develop roles (such as father, husband, mother, wife, or daughter) and assign roles to others in the family, who "play" the assigned role. Each actor adjusts his or her behavior to what he or she thinks the other person is going to do.

Children derive much of their self-concept, or thoughts and feelings about themselves, from symbolic messages conveyed by their parents. These messages may be expressed in words: "David is a naughty boy," or "Joan is a very smart girl." Or they may be expressed in actions, such as withholding or bestowing rewards. From symbolic messages, children learn to enact expected roles and follow prescribed behavior.

But meanings are conveyed both ways. That is, children influence the way parents act as well. Parents will respond differently to a child who is rebellious and to a child who is a conformist, for example. The same principles of reciprocal interaction by means of symbols apply to the relationship between spouses and other family members.

Symbolic interaction is important because our actions and feelings are determined not just by what happens to us but also by how we interpret those events. For example, people define family violence differently. One woman may regard a slap by her husband as unacceptable violence and seek help from the police or a crisis center; another woman may view a couple of punches as a loss of temper not worth mentioning. Symbolic interaction theory is widely used in family therapy to help individuals understand how they perceive one another and how they can modify their perceptions and behavior to develop a more meaningful and harmonious relationship.

### Systems Theory

**Systems theory** emphasizes the interdependence of family members (Broderick and Smith, 1979). Family members do not live in isolation; rather, what one does affects all the others. A person with deep-seated fears and anxieties and emotional instability, for example, may upset everyone else in the family. People may be interdependent in terms of not only money, shelter, and food but also love, affection, companionship, socialization, and other nontangible needs.

There may be various subsystems within the total family unit. Three children may constitute one subsystem, and their two parents another. A husband and his mother may constitute a subsystem, a mother and her daughter another, a father and son still another. Knowing how one subsystem relates to others can be an important way of understanding the relationships within a particular family. For example, chronic conflict in the husband-wife subsystem may have a negative effect on children in the family. To help the children, a therapist has to assist the spouses in dealing with their conflict.

The concept of interdependency of family members has been useful in the treatment of dysfunctional families. Chronic alcoholism, for example, is considered a family illness. A woman who is married to an alcoholic but denies the problem and covers up for the husband is an "enabler" because she enables him to continue drinking without suffering more consequences. Family interactions may become habitual and therefore difficult to change, even when they are dysfunctional. By analyzing the patterns of response and behavior, therapists seek to motivate partners to rethink and restructure the way they relate to each other and to other family members (Papp, 1983).

### Exchange Theory

**Exchange theory** is based on the principle that we enter into relationships in which we can maximize the benefits to us and minimize our costs (Nye, 1978). We form associations that we expect to be rewarding, and we tend to stay away from relationships that bring us pain. At the least, we hope that the rewards from a relationship will be proportional to the costs (Aldous, 1977).

People seek different things in relationships. For example, people marry for many different reasons: love and companionship, sex, procreation, status, prestige, power, and financial security. People are usually satisfied with relationships that at least partially fulfill their expectations and that do not exceed the price they expected to pay.

Some relationships are one-sided; one person does most of the giving, and the other the receiv-

ing. Over the long term, the giver is likely to become resentful and angry and to seek a more equal exchange.

**Equity theory** is a variation of exchange theory holding that exchanges between people have to be fair and balanced so that they mutually give and receive what is needed. People cooperate in finding mutual fulfillment rather than compete for rewards. They learn that they can depend on each other to meet needs, and their commitment involves strong motivations to please each other. Exchange theory is discussed in detail in Chapter 9, on mate selection, and in Chapter 14, on power and decision making.

## Conflict Theory

Conflict theory has never achieved the same status in contemporary family life literature as have symbolic interaction theory, systems theory, and exchange theory. Nevertheless, conflict theory is useful in describing and understanding family conflict as members struggle for ascendancy and power (Sprey, 1988).

**Conflict theory** begins by asserting that conflict in families is the normal state of affairs and that family dynamics can be understood by identifying the sources of conflict and the sources of power. What do family members fight about? Who wins, and how and why? What can be done about the conflict? The issue is not how to avoid conflict, but how to manage it, deal with it, and resolve it. When conflict is disruptive and negative, change is needed, and so resolving the conflict becomes the motivation for establishing a more rewarding and meaningful relationship. Solutions come through establishing better communication, developing empathy and understanding, and being motivated to change. Solutions come as well through bargaining, negotiation, and compromise.

## Feminist Theory

**Feminist theory** is often called a "perspective" rather than a theory because it reflects thinking across the feminist movement and includes a variety of viewpoints that focus on the inequality of power between men and women in society, and especially in family life (MacDermid, Jurich, Myers-Walls, and Pelo, 1992). While there are many varia-

tions within the feminist perspective, at the heart of all of them is the issue of gender roles, particularly traditional gender roles. *Gender* is defined as the learned behaviors and characteristics associated with being male or female, and feminist theories examine how gender differences are related to power differences between men and women. Feminists assert that the female experience is just as important and valuable as the male experience in life but that women are exploited, devalued, and oppressed (Osmond and Thorne, 1993; Walker and Thompson, 1984). Feminist theory argues that family and gender roles have been constructed by society and do not derive from biological conditions, and that these roles were created in order for men to maintain power over women. Feminist theory is similar to conflict theory in that the conflict perspective focuses on the unequal power within groups or larger societies, while feminist theory focuses on the sex-gender system and the way male dominance in the family and society is oppressive to women.

Proponents of feminist theories have a common interest in understanding the subordination of women (Osmond and Thorne, 1993) and working to change conditions in society that promote barriers to opportunities for women (Thompson and Walker, 1995). Unique to the feminist perspective is the use of knowledge to raise the level of awareness of oppression and to end oppression and subordination based on social class, race/ethnicity, age, or sexual orientation. The feminist perspective is concerned with the overall oppression of all groups that are defined on the basis of age, class, race/ethnicity, disability, or sexual orientation (Baber and Allen, 1992).

In general, feminists have challenged the definition of family that is based on traditional roles. They see the family as a dynamic and diverse system whose members are constantly changing, and it should not confine men or women to proscribed roles. While they may have been socialized to perform particular roles (for example, males as provider and decision maker, and females as passive and nurturing), feminists maintain that both men and women can play various roles and be quite functional in all of them. This perspective provides couples with more flexibility, because both men and women can play roles based on their unique skills and interests, as opposed to the roles traditionally assigned based on their gender.

The feminist perspective is about choice and about equally valuing the choices individuals make. For example, if the man wants to stay home and take care of the children while the woman pursues a career, his choice should be valued as equally as a decision to pursue a career. Similarly, if the woman chooses to stay home and be the primary caregiver for the children, her choice, as well as her experience in the home, should be valued as equally as her husband's career. Feminists do not object to the idea of women being "traditional" as long as it is a choice that they make, and not a role imposed on them. Women need to make their own choices about how to live their lives, and they need access to the same opportunities available to men. And those choices need to be sup-ported and valued as equally as the choices men make in their lives.

### Critique of Family Theories

No one family theory has a monopoly on the truth. Each time a new theory is introduced, it is described as the "key" to understanding family phenomena (Nye, 1978) or as the wave of the future (Broderick and Smith, 1979; Holman and Burr, 1980). Inevitably, however, each theory falls short of completely explaining family processes. This shortcoming does not detract from the usefulness of theories but rather motivates us to look for additional ways to understand changing families and the interaction of the people in them.

## S U M M A R Y

1. A family is any group of persons united by the ties of marriage, blood, or adoption or any sexually expressive relationship, in which the adults cooperate financially to support and care for the children; the people are committed to one another in an intimate, interpersonal relationship; and the members see their identity as importantly attached to the group with an identity of its own.

2. Different family forms are determined by their structural arrangement, the persons in them, and their relationship to one another.

3. Modern views of the family emphasize its role in fulfilling personal needs for emotional security and companionship.

4. Although historically the American family was patriarchal, there has been a gradual shift to a more democratic power structure.

5. The marriage rate has declined since 1980.

6. The median age at first marriage is increasing for both men and women, resulting in an increase in unmarried young adults in the population.

7. Declining birthrates since 1965 have resulted in smaller families.

8. The percentage of married women in the workforce has been increasing steadily. At the present time, greater percentages of women with either preschool or grade-school children are working outside the home than are women without children.

9. The number of one-parent families, especially mother-child families, has risen considerably in recent years.

10. One increasing family form is gay or lesbian families.

11. Large numbers of gays and lesbians live in stable couple relationships, some with children.

12. Divorce rates increased steadily from 1958 until 1979, at which time they leveled off and even declined. At the present rate, it is predicted that between 50% and 60% of new marriages will end in divorce.

13. Three out of four divorced women and four out of five divorced men will eventually remarry, although those rates appear to be declining. The relatively high rates of divorce and remarriage have resulted in a large number of reconstituted, or blended, families.

14. Over the past 40 years, more adolescents have been engaging in sexual intercourse and at a younger age.

15. Unmarried teenagers are inefficient users of contraceptives. The result has been an increase in unmarried pregnancy. Altogether, over 1,260,000 babies were born to single mothers in the United States in 1996. About 96% of unwed mothers decide to keep their babies.

16. A theory is a tentative explanation of facts and data that have been observed.

17. Psychologists and sociologists have formulated a number of theories about the family. Seven main ones in helping to explain families are structural-functional theory, family developmental theory, symbolic interaction theory, systems theory, exchange theory, conflict theory, and feminist theory.

## KEY TERMS

family

voluntarily childless family

single-parent family

nuclear family

family of origin

family of procreation

extended family

blended, or reconstituted, family

stepfamily

binuclear family

polygamous family

polygynous family

polyandrous family

patriarchal family

matriarchal family

gay or lesbian family

cohabiting family

instrumental role

expressive role

patrilineal descent

patrilocal residence

matrilineal descent

matrilocal residence

bilateral descent

neolocal residence

cohort

theory

structural-functional theory

family developmental theory

symbolic interaction theory

systems theory

exchange theory

equity theory

conflict theory

feminist theory

## QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

1. What is your definition of a family? How is it similar to or different from the definition used in the text?

2. For either your family of origin or your present family (if you are married), how well does it adhere to instrumental and/or expressive roles.

3. What are the various reasons for current trends in marriage rates, age at first marriage, birthrates and family size, percentage of working mothers, and one-parent families?

4. What are your thoughts about current trends in nonmarital sexual behavior? What measures do you believe should be taken, if any, to decrease the incidence of unmarried pregnancy?

5. The text suggests that family philosophy has changed from an emphasis on institution to an emphasis on companionship. If you were to follow this philosophy, what kind of marriage would you strive to have? Explain.

6. Which family theory makes the most sense to you? How would you use that theory to help explain the behaviors and patterns in your family?

## SUGGESTED READINGS

Acock, A. P., and Demo, D. H. (1994). *Family Diversity and Well-being.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Focuses on the impact of family structural variations on family relationships and personal well-being.

Baber, K. M., and Allen, K. R. (1992). *Women and Families: Feminist Reconstructions.* New York: Guilford Press. Discusses women's experiences in families and gender relations.

Brubaker, T. H. (Ed.). (1993). *Family Relations: Challenges for the Future.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage. Traces changes in society and families.

Coontz, S. (1992). *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap.* New York: Basic Books. Dispels myths about the traditional family.

Coontz, S. (1997). *The Way We Really Are: Ending the War over America's Changing Families.* New York: Basic Books. Examines "nontraditional" family life and the way changes in family structure have had both positive and negative effects.

Drucker, J. (1998). *Families of Value: Gay and Lesbian Parents and Their Children Speak Out.* New York: Insight Books/Plenum Press. Presents stories by and about gay fathers and lesbian mothers raising children in various settings and situations.

Ganong, L. H., and Coleman, M. (1999). *Changing Families, Changing Responsibilities: Family Obligations Following Divorce and Remarriage.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. Explores responsibilities of members of stepfamilies.

Gottfreid, A. E., and Gottfreid, A. W. (Eds.). (1994). *Redefining Families, Implications for Children's Development.* New York: Plenum. Examines nontraditional families.

Jagger, G., and Wright, C. (Eds.). (1999). *Changing Family Values.* London, New York: Routledge. Covers the backlash against single mothers, lesbian and gay families and the law, family and social policy, and the future of the nuclear family.

Kissman, K., and Allen, J. A. (1993). *Single-Parent Families.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage. Discusses characteristics, problems, and interventions.

Laird, J., and Green, R. (Eds.). (1996). *Lesbians and Gays in Couples and Families: A Handbook for Therapists.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Presents a series of readings.

Marciano, T. D., and Sussman, M. B. (Eds.). (1991). *Wider Families: New Traditional Family Forms.* New York: Haworth Press. Explores various relationships that constitute families.

McLanahan, S., and Sandefur, G. (1994). *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Argues that the disadvantages for children living with single parents are substantial, occur across several important life domains, and persist long into adulthood.

Michael, R. T., Gagnon, J. H., Laumann, E. O., and Kolata, G. (1994). *Sex in America.* Boston: Little, Brown. Reports on a survey of sexual behavior.

Mulroy, E. A. (1995). *The New Uprooted: Single Mothers in Urban Life.* Westport, CT: Auburn House. Examines how single mothers from a diverse set of social and economic circumstances experience the dual roles of sole family breadwinner and sole resident parent in the changing urban environment.

Slater, S. (1995). *The Lesbian's Family Life Cycle.* New York: The Prepress. Traces five stages of the lesbian family life cycle.

Wood, J. T., and Duck, S. (Eds.). (1995). *Under-studied Relationships: Off the Beaten Track.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Discusses seven different types of relationships that have been understudied.