CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGY OF MARRIAGE AND FAMILY



Sarah Earl-Novell

Chabot College

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Marriage and Family Relations

Sarah Earl-Novell

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

About the Author

Acknowledgements

About the Book

Funding

Licensing

1: Introduction to Marriage and Family

1.1: Learning Objectives

1.2: Introduction

1.3: Definitions of Marriage and Family

1.4: Different Types of Family Structures

1.5: Statuses, Roles, and Family Groups

1.6: A Historical Context for Today's Families

1.7: Contemporary Family Life

1.8: The Sociological Imagination and Family Life

1.9: The Study of Demography

1.10: Theoretical Perspectives on the Family

1.11: Family-Focused Frameworks

1.12: Conclusion

2: Diversity in Family Life

2.1: Learning Objectives

2.2: Introduction

2.3: Exploring Diversity in Family Life

2.4: Polygamy and Consensual Non-Monogamy

2.5: Cohabitation

2.6: Same-Sex Couples and LGBTQ+ Families

2.7: Living Apart Together (LAT)

2.8: Singlehood

2.9: Single-Parent Families

2.10: Blended Families

2.11: Foster Families

2.12: Conclusion

3: Sex and Gender

3.1: Learning Objectives

3.2: Introduction

3.3: Defining Sex and Gender

3.4: The Gender Binary

3.5: The Social Construction of Gender
3.6: Doing Gender
3.7: Sex Assignment and Intersex Variations
3.8: Gender Identity
3.9: The Policing of Gender and Sexuality
3.10: Gender Inequality and Patriarchy
3.11: Feminism
3.12: The Gendered Division of Household Labor
3.13: Gender and the Labor Market
3.14: Conclusion

4: Race and Ethnicity

4.1: Learning Objectives
4.2: Introduction
4.3: Questioning Biological Definitions of Race
4.4: Race as a Social Construct
4.5: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity
4.6: Indigenous and Native American Families
4.7: Hispanic and Latino Families
4.8: Asian American Families
4.9: African American Families
4.10: Immigration and Family Life
4.11: Conclusion

5: Social Class

5.1: Learning Objectives
5.2: Introduction
5.3: Social Stratification and Family Life
5.4: Social Class and Family Inequality
5.5: Social Mobility
5.6: Standard of Living, Poverty, and Basic Needs
5.7: Social Class and Family Formation
5.8: Theoretical Perspectives on Social Stratification
5.9: Social Class, Parenting, and the Reproduction of Inequality
5.10: Conclusion

6: Sexuality and Sexual Orientation

6.1: Learning Objectives
6.2: Introduction
6.3: Sexual Orientation as a Spectrum
6.4: Glossary of Sexual Orientation and Related Terms
6.5: Patterns of LGBTQ+ Identification
6.6: Heteronormativity and Cisnormativity

6.7: The Lavender Scare, Stonewall, and the Policing of Sexuality
6.8: LGBTQ+ Activism, Pride, and Queer Joy
6.9: The HIV/AIDS Pandemic
6.10: LGBTQ+ Families, Family Acceptance, and Family Rejection
6.11: LGBTQ+ Youth, Families, and Inclusion in Schools
6.12: Marriage Equality
6.13: Conclusion

7: Attraction, Love, and Relationship Initiation

7.1: Learning Objectives
7.2: Introduction
7.3: Explaining Attraction - Evolutionary and Sociocultural Perspectives
7.4: The Role of Physical Attractiveness
7.5: Social Factors in Relationship Formation
7.6: Theoretical Models of Love
7.7: Shifts in Modern Courtship
7.8: Dating Apps and Digital Courtship
7.9: AI Companions and the Changing Meaning of Intimacy
7.10: Conclusion

8: Marriage

8.1: Learning Objectives
8.2: Introduction
8.3: Marriage as a Social Construction
8.4: Marriage as a Social Institution
8.5: Family Households and Modern Marriage Patterns
8.6: Global Variations in Marriage
8.7: The Regulation of Marriage - Interracial and Same-Sex Marriage
8.8: Marriage and Well-Being
8.9: The Marriage Benefit Imbalance
8.10: The Sociology of Weddings
8.11: Conclusion

9: Childlessness, Childfree Lives, and Pathways to Parenthood

9.1: Learning Objectives
9.2: Introduction
9.3: Childlessness and Childfree Lives
9.4: Reproductive Choice
9.5: Pathways to Parenthood
9.6: In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)
9.7: Surrogacy
9.8: Adoption
9.9: Demographic Patterns of Fertility and Family Formation

9.10: Racial Disparities in Maternal Health Outcomes
9.11: Conclusion

10: Parenting in Contemporary Society

10.1: Learning Objectives
10.2: Introduction
10.3: The Functions of Parenting
10.4: Sociological Perspectives on Parenting
10.5: Parenting Practices, Styles, and Ideologies
10.6: Parenting in LGBTQ+ Families
10.7: Working Parents, Childcare, and Family Life
10.8: The Challenges of Parenting in Contemporary Society
10.9: Parenting in the Age of Social Media
10.10: Parenting in the Age of Artificial Intelligence (AI)
10.11: Conclusion

11: Family Violence and Abuse

11.1: Learning Objectives
11.2: Introduction
11.3: Understanding Family Violence and Abuse
11.4: Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)
11.5: Patterns of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Across Gender and Sexuality
11.6: Effects of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) on Survivors, Children, and Families
11.7: Sexual Violence
11.8: Anti-Violence Activism, #MeToo, and Social Change
11.9: Child Abuse and Neglect
11.10: Incest and Sibling Sexual Abuse
11.11: Elder Abuse and Neglect
11.12: Intergenerational Trauma and the Effects of Violence Across Generations
11.13: Theoretical Perspectives on Family Violence and Sexual Violence
11.14: Conclusion

12: Divorce and Remarriage

12.1: Learning Objectives
12.2: Introduction
12.3: Divorce and the Legal Process
12.4: Measuring Divorce
12.5: A Brief History of U.S. Divorce Trends
12.6: Social Patterns in Divorce
12.7: Why Marriages End—Common Pathways to Divorce
12.8: Child Custody, Parenting Plans, and Co-Parenting
12.9: The Impact of Divorce
12.10: Remarriage, Repartnering, and Blended Families

12.11: Conclusion

Index

Glossary

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About the Author

Dr. Sarah Earl-Novell is a Sociology Professor at Chabot College in Hayward, California. She has taught Marriage and Family Relations for several years, along with courses including Principles of Sociology and Social Problems.



As a first-generation college student, Sarah is passionate about Open Educational Resources (OER) and their role in reducing financial barriers for students. She has used OER exclusively in her own teaching since 2021 and currently serves as the ASCCC OERI Discipline Lead for Sociology and as an OER/ZTC Division Mentor at Chabot College.

Sarah has also conducted sociological research on the impact of textbook costs on students and on the factors that influence faculty adoption of OER. She has presented this research at annual meetings of the American Sociological Association.

Before joining Chabot College, Sarah worked as a staff researcher at the Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California, Berkeley, where she contributed to a Mellon-funded project on The Future of Scholarly Communication. She earned an M.Sc. in Sociology from the London School of Economics and a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Sussex, where her doctoral studies were funded by the U.K. Economic and Social Research Council.

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About the Book

Overview

"Contemporary Sociology of Marriage and Family" offers a sociological introduction to family life, with particular attention to the United States. The book begins with foundational concepts in the sociology of the family, including definitions of marriage and family, theoretical perspectives, and the diversity of family forms. It then uses an intersectional framework to examine how gender, race, social class, and sexuality shape family experiences, opportunities, identities, and inequalities. Later chapters explore attraction, love, relationship formation, and marriage before turning to childfree lives, pathways to parenthood, and parenting. The textbook concludes with an examination of family violence, divorce, remarriage, and family change.

Throughout the book, students are encouraged to think critically about how families are shaped by both personal choices and larger social forces. The text also considers historical change, cultural variation, structural inequality, and the resilience of families and communities.

Building a Contemporary OER Book

One of the greatest strengths of OER is its flexibility. Instructors are welcome to reshape this textbook to fit the needs of their own students and courses. "Contemporary Sociology of Marriage and Family" is designed as a complete text for a semester-long Sociology of the Family course, but individual chapters can also be selected, reorganized, or adapted. The book reflects the collaborative spirit of OER while also incorporating substantial new and updated material.

Like all remix projects, this book builds on the work of many educators and OER authors. It draws on material from 15 existing OER textbooks, which were revised, updated, reorganized, and adapted for this text. The textbook draws extensively on current national data to document changing patterns in marriage and family life. Demographic statistics come primarily from the Pew Research Center and the U.S. Census Bureau. Other government and research sources are used throughout, where appropriate.

To keep the book current, accessible, and connected to contemporary sociology, it also incorporates numerous articles from "Contexts", the American Sociological Association's public-facing magazine, as well as selections from the American Sociological Association's "Sociological Insights: A Curated Collection of Videos", featuring interviews with sociologists. Contemporary research articles, documentaries, podcasts, news sources, and other multimedia resources further connect sociological concepts and research to current social issues and everyday family life.

An Evolving Resource

This book is intended to remain relevant and inclusive rather than static. The author plans to continue updating the book's research, statistics, and examples over time, while also developing additional resources, including a glossary, homework assignments, and learning activities in LibreTexts ADAPT. Feedback from students and instructors is encouraged, especially if readers notice errors, outdated information, gaps, or assumptions that warrant reconsideration. The book can only benefit from the perspectives and contributions of the broader OER community.

A Note from the Author

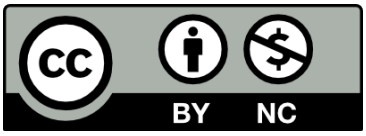
I am mindful that writing about families, identities, inequalities, and social change involves making choices about what to include, how to frame complex issues, and whose experiences are represented. I have tried to approach these topics with care, fairness, and respect while recognizing that I write from a particular social location and that no single textbook can capture every perspective or experience. I welcome suggestions from students and instructors that can make the book more accurate, inclusive, and useful.

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1: INTRODUCTION TO MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

1.1: Learning Objectives

1.2: Introduction

1.3: Definitions of Marriage and Family

1.4: Different Types of Family Structures

1.5: Statuses, Roles, and Family Groups

1.6: A Historical Context for Today's Families

1.7: Contemporary Family Life

1.8: The Sociological Imagination and Family Life

1.9: The Study of Demography

1.10: Theoretical Perspectives on the Family

1.11: Family-Focused Frameworks

1.12: Conclusion

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1.1: Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Define marriage and family
- Identify different types of family structures in contemporary society
- Explain the differences among groups, aggregates, and categories and describe how group size influences family relationships
- Compare the 1950s nuclear family ideal with the historical reality of diverse family forms in the United States
- Explain how the rise of individualism has reshaped ideas about marriage, parenthood, and family life
- Apply the sociological imagination to connect personal family experiences to larger social forces
- Describe the role of demography in studying families
- Compare the main theoretical perspectives on marriage and family
- Outline key family-focused frameworks used to understand family life

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1.2: Introduction

This chapter introduces the study of the family from a sociological perspective. It begins with the fundamentals: how sociologists define marriage and family, the different family structures in today's society and historical shifts in family life. The statuses and roles family members inhabit, as well as how the family is a unit of study, are then explored.

The discussion expands to consider families within their larger social context. Using the sociological imagination, individual family experiences are connected to broader social forces. The chapter also explores how opportunities and life chances differ across families and how demography—the statistical study of populations—help sociologists to study marriage and family relations.

Finally, the chapter introduces several theoretical perspectives used by sociologists to study families, as well as more specialized, family-focused frameworks. These perspectives provide distinct lenses for understanding how families operate, why they change, and how they both shape and are shaped by society.

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1.3: Definitions of Marriage and Family

Exploring Definitions of Marriage and Family

In many societies, marriage and family are central social institutions. These organized systems of norms, roles, and relationships structure important areas of social life and help societies meet people's basic needs. From an early age, individuals are socialized to believe that finding the 'right' partner is essential for happiness and security and that children need two parents to thrive. Many laws and policies—including taxes, healthcare, and retirement benefits—reflect and reinforce this assumption by privileging marriage. Yet important questions remain: Should these assumptions hold? And, in contemporary society, is marriage still the central foundation of family life and social organization?

Defining marriage is not as straightforward as it may seem and even sociologists do not agree on a single definition. For our purposes, marriage is defined as a legally recognized social contract between two people, traditionally based on a sexual relationship and implying a permanence of the union. However, applying cultural relativism—the practice of understanding social arrangements within their own cultural context rather than judging them by the standards of one's own society—reminds us that definitions of marriage vary widely across cultures. Using this perspective, sociologists consider variations of marriage such as whether a legal union is required, whether more than two people can be involved, or whether a marriage is religious or customary rather than civil.

Sociologists study the relationship between the social institutions of marriage and family because historically, marriage has been the way in which family is formed, and families are the most basic social unit in society. Both marriage and family create socially recognized roles and statuses (such as husband, wife, parent, or child) that are sanctioned—meaning formally recognized and socially approved—by society.

Defining what constitutes a family can be challenging and remains a major topic of debate in sociology, politics, and religion. Social conservatives often define the family in structural terms, emphasizing specific roles that each family member is expected to fulfill. Sociologists, by contrast, tend to define family more broadly as a socially recognized group—typically connected by blood, marriage, cohabitation, or adoption—that shares emotional bonds and, as an economic unit, collectively helps meet members' material and financial needs.

Sociologists also distinguish families based on how people enter them. A family of orientation refers to the family into which a person is born, while a family of procreation is one that is formed through marriage or partnership.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, a family consists of two or more people who live together and are related by birth, marriage, or adoption. One person is identified as the householder—the person, or one of the people, in whose name the home is owned or rented. The Census Bureau also collects information about other living arrangements, including unmarried cohabiting partners, but these relationships are not classified as a Census family unless the people involved are related by birth, marriage, or adoption. The length of time a couple has lived together does not change this classification. Sociologists often use a broader definition of family because family life can include important relationships and forms of support that fall outside the Census Bureau's formal definition.

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1.4: Different Types of Family Structures

Exploring Different Types of Family Structures

- A nuclear family consists of two parents and their children. A variation of this type of unit is the single-parent family, formed through circumstances such as unwed parenthood, divorce, or the death of a spouse.
- An extended family includes the nuclear family plus other relatives, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, or cousins. In some cases, this takes the form of a multigenerational family, with three or more generations closely connected or living together.
- A blended family develops when parents remarry or cohabit, creating households that may include step-parents, step-siblings, or half-siblings.
- The term traditional family usually refers to a nuclear family with two parents, often imagined as a breadwinner husband and a stay-at-home wife. This model, especially associated with the post–World War II period in the United States, has often been promoted as a cultural norm by socially conservative scholars and politicians. More recently, elements of this image have reappeared in the online “trad wife” subculture, which romanticizes women’s domestic roles. In reality, however, many families—especially working-class families, immigrant families, and families of color—have long depended on dual incomes and have never fit this narrow model.
- The modern family typically follows a dual-earner model—with both partners participating in paid labor outside the home—and is nuclear in structure. Women, however, tend to perform a disproportionate share of housework and caregiving responsibilities. This unequal distribution of domestic labor is known as the second shift, a concept coined by Sociologist Arlie Hochschild that will be examined in greater detail in subsequent chapters.
- The postmodern family challenges the idea that there is a single dominant model of what a family "should" look like. It questions heteronormative expectations and recognizes that families need not be headed by two married, heterosexual parents. The TV show 'Modern Family' portrays a variety of family types, including blended families and families headed by same-sex parents, reflecting the diversity of contemporary family life.
- A cohabiting family refers to people living together in an intimate partnership without being legally married. Cohabiting families may or may not include children.
- A chosen family refers to close, supportive relationships that people actively create with friends, partners, community members, or others who may not be legally or biologically related. Chosen families can be especially important for people whose families of origin are unavailable, unsupportive, geographically distant, or unable to meet their emotional and practical needs.

These family forms show that families are not fixed or uniform; they are shaped by social norms, legal recognition, economic resources, and changing expectations about intimacy, caregiving, and belonging.

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1.5: Statuses, Roles, and Family Groups

Exploring Statuses, Roles, and Family Groups

Statuses and Roles

In the study of families, sociologists use the concept of status to understand how individuals occupy different social positions—both within the family and in the larger society—and how these positions shape their roles and interactions. There are three main types of status: ascribed status, achieved status, and master status.

- Ascribed status is the involuntary social position a person is born into such as their race, sex, or social class.
- Achieved status is earned through personal choices and efforts, for example becoming a college student, influencer, athlete, or parent.
- Master status is the status that most strongly defines a person in the eyes of others, sometimes overshadowing other aspects of who they are. For instance, someone may be seen first and foremost as a parent, regardless of their career or other achievements.

Our racial, cultural-ethnic, religious, and economic statuses shape how we grow up and are socialized, influencing the expectations placed upon us and the opportunities and resources available from birth.

Roles are also important when conceptualizing marriage and family. Role strain can occur when the demands of one particular role feels overwhelming, such as when a parent struggles to balance childcare and household duties. Role conflict arises when expectations from different roles clash—for example, when work responsibilities interfere with being present as a parent or when the demands of school compete with being a supportive partner.

Groups, Aggregates, and Categories

In sociology, an important unit of study is the group. A group is made up of two or more people who share a common identity, interact regularly, and have shared expectations or roles. As such, the family can be categorized as a group. This is different from the everyday use of the word group. For example, while most people might call six strangers at a bus stop a group, sociologists would not. Instead, sociologists use the term aggregate to describe people who are in the same place at the same time but do not share interaction or common identity. An example of an aggregate include people in a movie theater.

Sociologists also use the term category to describe people who share a characteristic but are not necessarily connected in other ways. For example, brown-eyed people, people who wear hats, or people who vote Democratic form categories—they do not need to interact or share space.

In the study of marriage and family relations, sociologists often examine both family groups and broader categories of family types to identify trends and patterns. Groups come in different sizes, with important consequences for how they function. German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858–1918) was one of the first scholars to analyze this systematically. He argued that group size shapes the nature of social relationships, distinguishing in particular between dyads, groups of two people, and triads, groups of three. The number of people in a group plays an important structural role in the nature of the group's functioning. Dyads are the simplest groups because two people have only one relationship between them. Triads have three relationships. A group of four people has six possible relationships, five people have ten, six have fifteen, and so on. Triads typically require more coordination and negotiation than dyads. For example, a newly married couple forms a dyad in which the partners can focus primarily on their relationship with one another. When their first child is born, the dyad becomes a triad, introducing new roles, responsibilities, and relationship dynamics within the family.

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1.6: A Historical Context for Today's Families

Exploring A Historical Context for Today's Families

In earlier decades, popular television shows and movies often portrayed families as uniform and traditional, giving the impression that single-parent families, same-sex couples, interracial partnerships, working mothers, and couples choosing not to have children were unusual or nonexistent. Many family arrangements that are common today were largely absent from mainstream media. Issues such as intimate partner violence (IPV), child abuse, alcoholism, and marital dissatisfaction were also rarely discussed publicly. A sociological approach helps us look beyond these idealized images and examine how families have actually changed over time.

The Nostalgia Trap

In contrast to idealized images of the past, some contemporary public discourse suggests that parents are now too busy working to raise their children "properly." Commentators frequently point to children growing up without fathers due to divorce or non-marital births, as well as concerns about youth behaviors such as teenage pregnancy, substance use, or violence.

These concerns are often linked to broader social changes, including the decline of the traditional nuclear family, the increased labor force participation of women, and the growth of single-parent households. Some observers argue that mothers should reduce their work hours or leave the labor force altogether in order to devote more time to childrearing. Others express nostalgia for the 1950s, a period often remembered as simpler and more stable, when many families followed a breadwinner–homemaker model in which one parent earned wages while the other provided full-time care at home.

Families have indeed changed, but this longing for the 1950s reflects what Stephanie Coontz (2000) calls the "nostalgia trap." While 1950s television shows portrayed one version of family life, they obscured the diversity and inequalities that many families experienced at the time (Coontz, 2000). Research also suggests that changes in family structure have not produced the widespread social decline that critics often claim. Instead, many of the challenges facing families today are more closely linked to broader structural forces, including rising inequality, poverty, systemic racism, sexism, and other forms of institutional discrimination.

Preindustrial Families

In the United States, the industrial economy developed gradually between about 1750 and 1850. Before the rise of factory-based production in urban areas, many families functioned as agricultural work units in which home and work were closely intertwined. In this preindustrial context, families were often responsible for their own economic production, and household members worked together to meet basic needs.

In earlier foraging societies—often called hunter-gatherer societies—people typically lived in small kin-based groups composed of several nuclear families. These cooperative groupings helped ensure a stable food supply and collective survival. Although men often focused on hunting and women on gathering and childcare, the contributions of both were essential and generally understood to be of comparable importance for group survival.

Many Indigenous societies in North America also organized gender and family roles differently from the patriarchal models later imposed by Europeans, which emphasized male authority and systematically privileged men's power over women and children (Quale, 1992). Some Indigenous societies, for example, were matrilineal, meaning descent was traced through the mother's line, or matrifocal, meaning family life centered on women's roles. Relatively few, however, were strictly matriarchal. These examples highlight the diversity of family organization prior to industrialization and challenge the assumption that the male breadwinner–female homemaker model is universal or timeless.

Family systems were also shaped by economic resources and forms of production. In some societies, families' wealth and well-being depended heavily on fertile land and the size of their herds. Because men were often more involved than women in herding activities, they gradually gained greater authority within families, contributing to the expansion of patriarchal family structures.

The colonization of Indigenous peoples further reshaped family organization by imposing European patriarchal norms.

Colonization in the United States refers to two related structural processes. The first was the colonization of North America by European powers seeking to expand their wealth and geopolitical influence. This phase culminated in the formation of the United States after the American Revolutionary War, which ended in 1783 with the incorporation of the original thirteen colonies into the new nation.

This process of colonization describes the actions taken by the colonies—and later the United States—to further expand power, territory, and economic gain. These actions included the forced displacement of Native Americans from their ancestral homelands and the establishment of boarding schools for Indigenous children that intentionally disrupted families and suppressed Indigenous languages and cultures. Although Indigenous family structures differed across societies, many Native communities were organized around strong kinship networks. Some nomadic groups tended to have smaller nuclear family households, while more sedentary groups often maintained larger extended family networks. In both cases, families were supported by broader systems of marital alliances and kin obligations, meaning that "no single family was forced to go it alone" (Coontz, 1995).

At the same time, European colonists enslaved Africans who were brought to North America against their will, treating them as property and routinely separating family members. Together, colonization and slavery profoundly reshaped family structures and social life across multiple populations. The institution of slavery in colonial North America and later the United States made it extremely difficult for enslaved African Americans to sustain legally protected family ties or long-term family stability. Enslavers frequently sold children and separated spouses, parents, siblings, and extended kin to maximize profits. In response, enslaved people demonstrated resilience by forming extended kin networks, adopting orphaned children, and incorporating non-biological individuals into family systems. These adaptive strategies helped sustain family and community ties despite the structural violence of slavery.

Industrialization and Family Change

With the rise of industrial capitalism between 1750 and 1850, many working-class families—and families of color, who were often excluded from unionized jobs or remained enslaved—relied on the labor of all household members. To survive economically, adults and children alike entered the workforce. Many family members, including women and children, worked in factories or in domestic service, often laboring for middle- and upper-class households.

Middle-class families who had inherited property and wealth—the vast majority of whom were White—generally did not require all household members to participate in paid labor. The income of the breadwinning father was often sufficient to support the household financially. These families could purchase homes, hire domestic workers, employ tutors, and send their children to private schools. Jobs that paid enough to support an entire family were sometimes referred to as "family-wage" jobs and they were more common during this historical period than they are today. As industrialization shifted households away from producing their own food and goods toward purchasing them on the market, many families experienced a decline in their overall standard of living.

The Cult of Domesticity

This division between fathers engaged in paid work and mothers responsible for home and family contributed to the ideologies of separate spheres and the cult of domesticity. Both portrayed men and women as naturally suited to different roles: men to the public world of work and breadwinning, and women to the private world of homemaking, caregiving, and family life (figure 1.6.1). As a result, this gendered division of labor has sometimes been treated as a natural or universal family arrangement. In reality, it was a relatively recent economic development that primarily reflected the experiences of middle-class White families. In these households, women were expected to perform unpaid domestic and caregiving labor, while men's control over wages often reinforced patriarchal authority within the family (Gottlieb, 1993). Women living in poverty, immigrant women, and many women of color, however, continued to work for pay out of economic necessity.



Figure 1.6.1: Retro Housewife in a kitchen. (CC0/Public Domain; ArtsyBee).

The cult of domesticity was an ideology centered on white womanhood that portrayed white women as asexual, pure, morally superior, and naturally suited to the private sphere of the home. Importantly, this ideal was imposed as the standard for all women, despite the very different material realities many women faced.

In practice, the ideology marginalized working-class white women and women of color, who were often excluded from the dominant definition of "true womanhood" because economic necessity required them to engage in paid labor. As a result, the cult of domesticity reinforced both gender and racial hierarchies by defining womanhood in ways that privileged white, middle-class domesticity.

During this period, coverture laws also legally subsumed married women's identities under those of their husbands. Upon marriage, a white married woman's legal personhood was effectively absorbed into that of her husband. She generally could not own property independently, sign legal documents, or control her own wages, which were legally transferred to her husband.

Although many white middle-class women were not required to labor in factories or plantation fields, they were nonetheless systematically denied full legal rights and autonomy under coverture. In this way, white middle-class women occupied a contradictory position: they often enjoyed a degree of material comfort and symbolic status as "pure" and moral beings, but this status came at the cost of independent legal personhood.

Early and Mid-20th-Century Families

Medical, automotive, and other technological advances contributed to increasing numbers of women entering the workforce in the 1920s, most often in clerical and office positions. The economic pressures of the Great Depression in the 1930s pushed even more women into paid employment outside the home.

During the 1940s, World War II created significant labor shortages in shipyards, factories, and other industries as men enlisted in the military. In response, the federal government and private industry launched national campaigns encouraging women to join the workforce to support the war effort and the broader economy. Women responded in large numbers and many remained employed after the war ended. One of the most enduring symbols of this period is Rosie the Riveter, the iconic figure from a wartime advertising campaign designed to recruit women into defense industry jobs (figure 1.6.2). This popular poster exemplifies the power that women experienced and demonstrated during World War II.



Figure 1.6.2: Rosie the Riveter poster. (Public Domain; National Archives Catalog).

As men returned from military service in Europe and Japan, popular media—including books, magazines, and newspapers—encouraged women to marry and have children. Birth rates rose sharply, people married at younger ages, and the now-famous Baby Boom generation emerged.

The postwar national economy expanded rapidly as automotive and other manufacturing jobs multiplied, enabling many families—often for the first time—to purchase their own homes. Suburban communities grew quickly, and many primarily White middle-class families moved into them (Skolnick, 1991).

Even so, fewer than 60% of American children in the 1950s lived in breadwinner–homemaker nuclear families (Coontz, 2000). Teenage pregnancy rates were roughly twice as high as they are today, although many pregnant teens were already married or married in response to the pregnancy.

Although less publicly discussed at the time, problems such as alcoholism and family violence were present in many households. Historians have also documented that many women were dissatisfied with the limitations of full-time homemaking. This dissatisfaction challenged what would later be termed the “feminine mystique”—the cultural belief that women could and should find complete fulfillment through marriage, motherhood, and homemaking (Friedan, 1963).

The widespread availability of the birth control pill beginning in the early 1960s also reshaped family life. More reliable contraception gave many women greater control over the timing and number of pregnancies, making it easier to delay marriage and childbearing, pursue education, and participate in paid employment. In turn, these changes contributed to shifting expectations about gender, marriage, and motherhood. Access to contraception was not equal, however. Low income women, women of color, unmarried women, and women living in more socially conservative communities often faced greater legal, financial, medical, and social barriers to obtaining birth control. As a result, the expansion of reproductive autonomy benefited women unevenly across race, social class, marital status, and place.

By the 1970s, economic conditions had begun to deteriorate for many families. Home prices and college tuition rose much faster than household incomes, prompting increasing numbers of women to enter the labor force out of economic necessity, as well as for personal fulfillment. As a result, working motherhood became far more common. By the late 1970s, more than 60% of married women with children under age six were in the labor force, compared to fewer than 19% in 1960 (Coontz, 1997). Working mothers were no longer a rarity but an increasingly typical feature of American family life.

The highly gendered nuclear family model popularized in the 1950s is better understood as a historical exception than as a long-standing norm in U.S. family life. Prior to industrialization—and for many families even afterward—women as well as men engaged in paid and unpaid labor to sustain the household. As Coontz (1995) observes, "American families always have been diverse, and the male breadwinner–female homemaker nuclear ideal that most people associate with ‘the’ traditional family has predominated for only a small portion of our history" (Coontz, 1995). From this perspective, the 1950s should not be viewed as the final era of family "normality." Instead, the 1950s family form represented a departure from the long-standing pattern of family diversity in the United States (Skolnick, 1991).

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1.7: Contemporary Family Life

Exploring Contemporary Family Life

Historically, research shows that family was central to people's lives. In a 2010 survey by Pew Research Center in Washington, DC, 76% of adults surveyed stated that family is “the most important” element of their life—just 1% said it was “not important” (Pew Research Center, 2010). More recently, however, public opinion towards the family as a social institution is mixed. A report entitled "The Modern American Family: Key Trends in Marriage and Family Life" (Aragão et al., 2023) indicated that fewer people now see marriage and parenthood as necessary for a meaningful life and more are worried rather than hopeful about the future of marriage and family. As such, the traditional family model—married parents with children under the age of 18—has become much less common (see Figure 1.7.1).

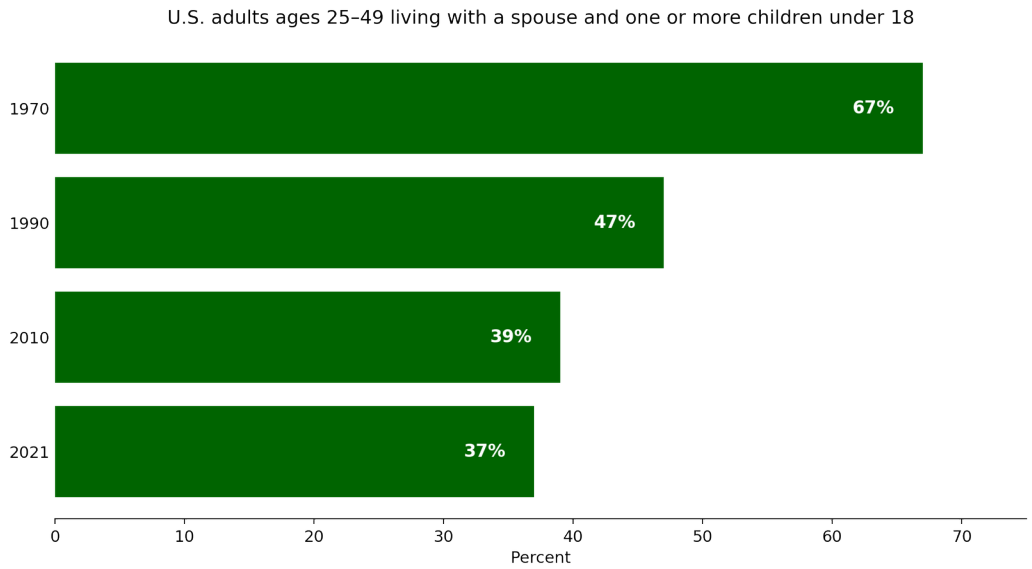


Figure 1.7.1: Married adults with children in the United States, 2023. (Pew Research Center).

In 1970, about two-thirds (67%) of Americans aged 25–49 lived in this type of household, but today it’s only about one-third (37%) reflecting greater diversity in family life (bar chart recreated from data in Pew Research Center, “How the American Family Has Changed,” September 14, 2023).

Marriage rates overall have declined, as many Americans are delaying marriage or choosing not to marry at all. In addition, data show that women are having children later in life and that men are less likely to live in a household with their own children. In 2019, 32% of Millennial men were living in a household with their children, compared to 41% of Gen X men in 2003 and 44% of Boomer men in 1987 (Barroso et al., 2020).

Recent evidence suggests that changing attitudes toward marriage begin before adulthood. Using Monitoring the Future survey data, Pew Research Center found that the share of U.S. 12th graders who say they are likely to get married someday declined from 80% in 1993 to 67% in 2023. The decline was especially pronounced among girls: in 2023, 61% of 12th-grade girls said they wanted to get married someday, compared with 74% of boys. Pew also found that fewer 12th graders now say they are very likely to want children if they marry, suggesting that young people’s expectations for marriage and parenthood are becoming more uncertain and gendered (Braga, 2025).

Contemporary concerns about family change often focus on divorce, nonmarital births, father absence, working parents, and the decline of multigenerational living. Some scholars and commentators attribute these shifts in part to the rise of individualism, a cultural orientation that prioritizes personal autonomy, choice, and self-fulfillment over collective family obligations. As individualist values have become more prominent in the United States, expectations surrounding marriage, parenthood, and family life have also changed.

From a sociological perspective, however, these patterns should not be understood simply as evidence of family decline. Rising economic insecurity, the high cost of housing and childcare, and student debt have made family formation more financially challenging for many young adults. At the same time, growing acceptance of diverse family forms—including cohabitation, single parenthood, and child-free lifestyles—has weakened the cultural expectation that marriage is a required life milestone. Changes in gender roles have also played a role, as women's increased educational attainment and labor force participation have reshaped expectations about breadwinning, caregiving, and partnership. Together, these structural and cultural shifts help explain why contemporary views of marriage and family are more varied and uncertain than in previous generations.

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1.8: The Sociological Imagination and Family Life

Exploring the Sociological Imagination and Family Life

The concept of the sociological imagination, developed by C. Wright Mills in 1959, helps us connect personal troubles to larger social issues (Mills, 1959). Mills argued that biography—our personal experiences—and history—the broader social context—are deeply intertwined. Our opportunities and challenges are shaped not only by individual choices but also by when and where we are born, as well as by social class, gender, race, culture, and the institutions that structure our lives.

Applied to family life, the sociological imagination encourages us to look beyond individual experiences and consider the broader forces that shape them. For example, when a couple experiences role conflict and struggles to balance work and childcare, the problem is not only personal; it is also connected to factors such as childcare costs, workplace policies, work schedules, and the unequal division of household labor. Similarly, patterns such as rising divorce rates or delayed marriage reflect not only individual decisions but also economic change, shifting gender roles, and evolving cultural expectations.

As Jerry A. Jacobs (2021) explains in an updated discussion of Mills, a divorce may feel like a deeply personal experience for one couple, but when divorce becomes widespread, it also becomes a social issue that can reveal broader changes in society.

This perspective is also evident in the work of historian Stephanie Coontz (1997), whose research is widely cited by sociologists. Coontz demonstrates that what many people think of as the "traditional family" is not universal but emerged within a particular historical and cultural context. By linking family patterns to economic conditions, gender norms, and public policies, her work illustrates how seemingly private family experiences are embedded in broader social structures.

Video: Sociological Imagination

Duration: 5 minutes and 58 seconds.

This short video, "Sociological Imagination," introduces C. Wright Mills' idea that sociology helps us connect personal troubles to public issues.

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

View this YouTube Video online

In the United States and around the world, families exist across a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. The family into which you are born or adopted (i.e.., your family of orientation) has a major influence on your life opportunities. As such, where an individual ends up economically is shaped not only by their choices but also by the opportunities available to them. Sociologist Max Weber called these opportunities life chances—the access people have to basic resources and opportunities in society. Because family structures differ as outlined above, not everyone has the same life chances. Life chances help explain why some individuals have more advantages or face greater obstacles than others, influencing outcomes in work, school, marriage, and family life.

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1.9: The Study of Demography

Exploring The Study of Demography

Demography is the scientific study of human populations, focusing on their size, growth, structure, and changes over time. Sociologists use demographic data to examine patterns such as births, deaths, marriages, divorces, migration, and aging in order to understand how populations evolve and how demographic trends both shape and are shaped by society.

A generational cohort is a group of people born during roughly the same time in a particular society (see Figure 1.9.1.). As they move through life, members of a generational cohort often encounter similar social conditions, cultural expectations, technologies, and historical events. These shared experiences can influence their attitudes, opportunities, and family patterns.

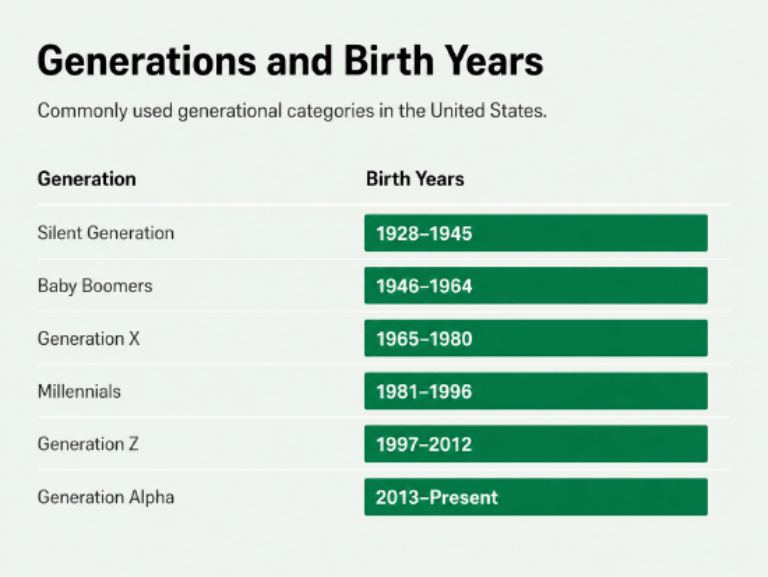


Figure 1.9.1: Commonly used generational categories and birth years in the United States. Birth-year ranges for the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials are based on Pew Research Center Generations, 2019); boundaries for Generation Z and Generation Alpha vary by source.

After World War II, the United States experienced dramatic shifts in family life: families had been separated, many relatives had died or been injured, and women who had worked in factories returned home. In 1946, these disruptions were reflected in unusual demographic trends. People married younger, had more children, and divorced and remarried at higher rates than before. From 1946 to 1956, the birth rate surged and then began to decline, returning to pre-war levels by 1964. The millions of children born during this period became known as the Baby Boom Generation (born 1946–1964).

Baby Boomers left a lasting imprint on family life in the United States, shaping it in ways that are still felt today. Baby Boomers—many of whom are now the grandparents of current college students—came of age during a period of major changes in marriage and family life, including a sharp rise in divorce during the 1960s and 1970s.

Even today, Baby Boomers continue to experience relatively high rates of divorce, particularly later in life. Their children make up much of Generation X and the Millennial generation. Because Baby Boomers constitute such a large demographic cohort, changes in their marriage, divorce, and parenting patterns have had an especially visible impact on U.S. family life. Understanding contemporary demographic trends therefore requires attention not only to Baby Boomers themselves but also to the ripple effects of their experiences across subsequent generations.

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1.10: Theoretical Perspectives on the Family

Exploring Theoretical Perspectives on the Family

Sociologists study families at both the micro level, which focuses on individuals and small groups, and the macro level, which examines larger social structures and patterns at the level of societies, nations, and the world. To explain marriage and family relations, sociologists use a variety of theoretical perspectives to interpret behaviors and experiences within families—such as parenting, marriage, and sibling relationships—as well as broader influences, including social policies, culture, and economic change. These perspectives help sociologists identify patterns, causes, and consequences and understand why family life changes over time and varies across societies.

This section introduces the major sociological perspectives used to study families, including Structural Functionalism, Symbolic Interactionism, Conflict Theory, and Feminist Theory, as well as the concept of Intersectionality. Together, these broad theoretical paradigms provide different ways of understanding how families operate and how they are shaped by the wider society.

Structural Functionalism

Structural Functionalists view the family as a vital social institution that helps stabilize society and maintains social cohesion. French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), one of the founding figures of sociology, contributed to Structural Functionalism, the perspective that views society as a system of interrelated parts that work together to maintain stability and order. From a Structural Functionalist perspective, the family is a key social institution because it performs essential functions that support both individuals and society. In this framework, the family performs several key functions.

Firstly, the family serves as the primary unit of socialization for children. Society is unable to survive without adequately socializing its young members. In most societies, the family is the central context within which this process occurs. Parents, siblings, and—when families are extended rather than nuclear—other relatives all play important roles in socializing children from birth.



Figure 1.10.1: Socialization of children. (Adapted from Figure 11.3 in "Sociological Perspectives on the Family" Introduction to Sociology: Understanding and Changing the Social World, via Social Science LibreTexts).

Second, the family is ideally a major source of both practical and emotional support for its members. Families help meet material needs by providing food, clothing, shelter, and other basic necessities. They also offer vital emotional resources, including love, comfort, care, and assistance during times of stress or crisis—forms of intangible support that are essential for individual well-being.

Third, the family helps regulate sexual activity and reproduction. All societies establish norms governing with whom and under what circumstances sexual relationships are considered appropriate. The family is a central institution for transmitting these norms and has historically been the primary social context within which reproduction occurs. One important function of this regulation is to help ensure that infants receive adequate emotional and practical care after birth.

Most societies also enforce an incest taboo, a social norm that prohibits sexual relationships between certain relatives. From a Structural Functionalist perspective, this taboo helps reduce conflict and role confusion within families while encouraging the formation of social ties between different families, thereby strengthening social cohesion in the broader society.

Fourth, the family provides its members with a social identity. At birth, children inherit key social locations from their parents, including social class, race and ethnicity, religion, and nationality. These dimensions of social identity are closely linked to life chances. Some children may experience cumulative advantages because of the social positions into which they are born, while others many encounter significant structural barriers when, for example, their family's social class is located lower in the social hierarchy.

Fifth, families also teach gender roles which are an important part of the economic function of a family. In each family, there is a division of labor that consists of instrumental and expressive roles. Men tend to assume the instrumental roles in the family, which typically involves work outside of the family providing financial support and family status. Women tend to assume the expressive roles, which typically involve work inside of the home providing emotional support and physical care for children (Crano and Aronoff, 1978). According to Structural Functionalists, notably Talcott Parsons, dividing family roles by gender helps maintain social order and keeps families stable and well-coordinated. When family members move outside of these roles, the family is thrown out of balance and must recalibrate to function properly. For example, if the father assumes an expressive role such as providing daytime care for the children, the mother must take on an instrumental role gaining paid employment outside of the home for the family to maintain balance.

The Structural Functionalist perspective of the family asserts that sudden or far-reaching changes in conventional family structures and processes may threaten family stability and, by extension, the stability of society. For example, many sociology and marriage and family textbooks published during the 1950s argued that the male breadwinner–female homemaker nuclear family represented the optimal arrangement for children because it effectively met both economic and childrearing needs. According to this view, significant departures from this model were thought to be risky potentially harming children and weakening the family as a social institution. While contemporary textbooks rarely present such strong claims, some conservative commentators continue to express concern about the potential effects on children of working mothers and single-parent families.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory, influenced by Karl Marx (1818-1883), emphasizes the role of power, inequality, and social structure in shaping family life. Marx argued that society is organized around the control of valuable resources, and conflict theorists apply this idea to the family, viewing it not always as a safe haven but as a site in which power struggles can occur. In the United States, families are often defined as private entities, leaving family matters largely to those within the household.

Conflict theorists agree that the family performs important social functions, but they also highlight problems within family life that the Structural Functionalist perspective tends to minimize or overlook.

First, conflict theorists argue that the family, as a social institution, can contribute to social inequality in several ways. One important mechanism is the transmission of class advantage and disadvantage across generations. Because families pass wealth, resources, and opportunities from one generation to the next—and because families differ greatly in the resources they possess—inequalities can persist and accumulate over time.

In addition, as family systems evolved historically—particularly during industrialization—many became increasingly patriarchal, or organized around male authority and the systematic privileging of men over women and children. Patriarchy is a social system in which men hold greater power, authority, and privilege than women in both the family and society more broadly. This concept is examined more fully in later sections of the textbook. From a Conflict perspective, patriarchy institutionalizes and reproduces men's structural advantage, reinforcing their dominance within families and the broader social order.

The family can also be a source of conflict for its own members. Early research on marital power, such as the 1960 study by Blood and Wolfe, found that the individual with greater access to valuable resources holds the most power. Because money is a key valuable resource, men who worked in paid labor outside the home generally held more power than women performing unpaid domestic labor within the home. Disputes over the division of household labor are often a common source of marital conflict.

Although the Structural Functionalist perspective emphasizes the family's role in providing emotional comfort and support, many families fall short of this ideal. Rather than functioning as uniformly harmonious and happy units—as often portrayed in 1950s television shows—some families experience significant tension, inequality, and even harm, such as physical punishment, harsh discipline, and intimate partner violence (IPV). This theme is explored in greater depth in later chapters.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic Interactionists focus on symbols, social interaction, and the meanings people attach to everyday experiences (LaRossa and Reitzes, 1993). From this perspective, even the meaning of family is socially constructed. For some people, family may evoke a married mother, father, and children; for others, it may refer to any group of people connected through enduring relationships of care, responsibility, and belonging. Symbolic Interactionism therefore emphasizes that family is not a fixed or purely objective category but one whose meaning changes across cultures, historical periods, and social contexts.

Rather than concentrating primarily on large-scale institutions, Symbolic Interactionists examine the micro-level processes through which family members create and negotiate their relationships in everyday life. They study how partners and relatives communicate, interpret one another's behavior, develop shared meanings, and negotiate expectations surrounding roles such as spouse, parent, child, or sibling.

Consider the meaning of parent. Parenthood has often been associated with a biological relationship to a child. However, adoption, remarriage, assisted reproduction, foster care, and changing guardianship arrangements demonstrate that parenthood can also be defined through caregiving, responsibility, and social recognition rather than biology alone. Similarly, the meanings attached to mother and father have changed as expectations surrounding caregiving, breadwinning, and emotional involvement have evolved.

Symbolic Interactionists also examine family roles and how people interpret and perform them. Drawing on Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, family life can be viewed as a form of social interaction in which individuals perform particular roles and respond to the expectations of others. For example, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a "good" father was often defined primarily by his ability to provide financially for his family. Today, fathers are also commonly expected to participate in caregiving and contribute to their children's emotional, social, and intellectual development. The meaning of fatherhood has therefore changed alongside broader social expectations.

Communication within intimate relationships is another important area of Symbolic Interactionist research. Some studies examine how spouses communicate, interpret one another's words and behaviors, and attempt to resolve disagreements (Tannen, 2001). Research on working-class marriages, for example, has found gender differences in communication patterns, with wives in some studies more likely to want to discuss problems while husbands were more likely to withdraw or remain quiet. Such patterns may vary by social class, education, gender expectations, and other social circumstances. From a Symbolic Interactionist perspective, these everyday interactions are important because repeated patterns of communication help create and sustain the meanings, roles, and relationships that constitute family life.

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory focuses on how gender and gender inequality shape family life. From this perspective, the family is not only a source of love and support but also a potential site of inequality, particularly in the distribution of power, resources, paid and unpaid work, and caregiving responsibilities. Traditional family arrangements have often reinforced a gendered division of labor, with men positioned as breadwinners and women as caregivers and homemakers. Feminist scholars examine how these arrangements can constrain women's opportunities while granting men greater economic and social advantages.

These inequalities are closely connected to patriarchy—a social system in which men generally hold greater power, authority, and privilege than women. Within families, patriarchy can operate through unequal expectations, decision-making power, access to resources, and responsibility for unpaid labor. Feminist perspectives therefore emphasize that gender shapes family experiences, influencing how individuals are socialized, the roles they assume within households, and how family life is organized.

Gender socialization often begins early in family life. Children may encounter different expectations, toys, clothing, activities, and responsibilities based on gender. Boys, for example, may be encouraged toward independence, competitiveness, and assertiveness, while girls may receive stronger messages emphasizing nurturing, cooperation, or appearance. Household responsibilities can also become gendered: sons may be assigned tasks such as mowing the lawn or taking out the trash, while daughters may be more likely to babysit siblings or help with cooking and cleaning. Such patterns can reproduce broader gender

norms and prepare children for the unequal division of paid and unpaid labor they may encounter in adulthood (Chodorow, 1978; Lorber, 1994).

Feminist scholars also emphasize that gender inequality does not affect all families or all women in the same way. Experiences of family life vary according to social class, race and ethnicity, sexuality, and other dimensions of social inequality—a point developed further through Intersectionality. Feminist theory also draws attention to the possibility of more equitable family relationships in which partners share decision-making, caregiving, and household responsibilities.

Many of these themes—including the division of labor, work–family balance, and gender inequality—are explored in greater depth in later chapters.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a concept coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to explain how multiple systems of inequality can overlap and shape people's experiences.

Crenshaw argued that discrimination cannot always be understood by examining race, gender, social class, or other dimensions of inequality separately. Instead, these social positions intersect, creating experiences of privilege and disadvantage that cannot be explained by any single factor alone. For example, the experiences of Black women are shaped not simply by racism or sexism independently, but by the ways these systems interact.

In her 2016 TED Talk, The Urgency of Intersectionality, Crenshaw illustrates this point by asking audience members to recall the names of African Americans killed by police. Many recognized the names of Black men, but far fewer recognized Black women who had also been killed. Crenshaw argues that Black women can "slip through the cracks" of public awareness when racism and sexism are treated as separate issues, making their particular experiences less visible (Crenshaw, 2016).

TED Talk: The Urgency of Intersectionality

Duration: 18 minutes and 42 seconds

In this TED Talk, Kimberlé Crenshaw explains the concept of intersectionality, showing how systems of inequality—such as race and gender—overlap to shape people's experiences in complex ways. It highlights how gender and race cannot be understood in isolation, and how focusing only on binary categories can obscure the lived realities of those who experience multiple, intersecting forms of inequality.

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

View this YouTube Video online

Crenshaw also discusses the case of Emma DeGraffenreid, an African American woman whose discrimination claim against an employer was dismissed because the court treated race and gender as separate categories. The employer hired Black men for industrial jobs and white women for secretarial positions but did not hire Black women like DeGraffenreid. Because the court considered racial and gender discrimination separately, it failed to recognize the particular discrimination Black women experienced. Crenshaw used cases such as this to demonstrate why intersectionality matters: people positioned at the intersection of multiple systems of inequality may experience forms of disadvantage that remain invisible when each system is considered on its own.

Intersectionality is especially important to the study of marriage and family because family experiences are shaped by the overlapping effects of race, social class, gender, sexuality, immigration status, and other dimensions of social location. These intersecting inequalities can influence opportunities to marry and form families, access to economic resources, the distribution of caregiving responsibilities, and families' experiences with schools, workplaces, the legal system, and other institutions. For example, the opportunities and challenges experienced by a White middle-class married couple may differ substantially from those of a low-income single mother of color, a same-sex immigrant couple, or a multigenerational family facing both racism and

economic insecurity. An intersectional perspective therefore helps sociologists understand why family experiences vary across different social locations rather than treating all families as though they experience social life in the same way.

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1.11: Family-Focused Frameworks

Exploring Family-focused Frameworks

In addition to broad sociological theories, family scholars use several family-focused frameworks to analyze how relationships develop over time and how they are shaped by the social environments in which families live. These frameworks will appear throughout the textbook as tools for understanding topics such as parenting, divorce, caregiving, family violence, and economic stress. The frameworks introduced here include Social Exchange Theory, Family Systems Theory, Life Course Theory, and Social Ecological Theory.

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory views social relationships, including family relationships, as exchanges in which individuals weigh rewards—such as love, support, money, companionship, and status—against costs, including conflict, effort, stress, and sacrifice. People are assumed to evaluate the perceived benefits and costs of relationships, and these assessments can influence relationship choices, satisfaction, and stability.

The theory assumes that people generally seek rewarding relationships and try to minimize costs, although their decisions are not always perfectly rational or calculated. Social Exchange Theory shares some similarities with Conflict Theory because both emphasize resources, power, and inequality within relationships, but Social Exchange Theory focuses more specifically on how individuals evaluate exchanges and make relationship decisions.

A basic formulation is: Outcome = Rewards – Costs

Individuals may also compare the outcomes of a relationship with what they believe they deserve or expect from a relationship, as well as with perceived alternatives.

We often weigh our options in an effort to maximize rewards and minimize costs, although these judgments are not always perfectly rational and can sometimes lead to poor decisions. An important related concept is equity, or the perception that the rewards and costs of a relationship are distributed fairly between those involved.

For example, why do women who work 40 hours a week often continue to perform more housework and childcare than husbands who work similar hours? From a Social Exchange perspective, couples may evaluate not only the amount of work each partner performs but also whether the arrangement feels fair relative to their expectations, resources, alternatives, and gender-role beliefs. Women may have been socialized to view caregiving and housework as part of their responsibilities, while efforts to redistribute this labor may create conflict or resistance. As a result, an objectively unequal division of labor may sometimes be perceived or accepted as fair within the relationship.

In marriage and family life, Social Exchange Theory can therefore help explain how partners negotiate responsibilities, emotional support, resources, and decision-making. When partners perceive a relationship as rewarding and reasonably fair, satisfaction is generally more likely; when costs become high, rewards decline, or exchanges are perceived as inequitable, dissatisfaction and conflict may increase.

Family Systems Theory

Family Systems Theory comes under the Structural Functionalism umbrella and shares the functional approach of considering the dysfunctions and functions of complex groups and organizations. As such, Family Systems Theory views the family as an interconnected system in which each member's behavior affects and is affected by the others. Rather than studying individuals in isolation, this theory emphasizes the patterns of interaction, communication, and roles within the family unit. Families strive for balance so when one member experiences stress or change—such as illness, unemployment, or conflict—it impacts the entire system. For example, if parents argue frequently, children may act out at school or withdraw emotionally as a response to the tension at home. By focusing on these relationships and feedback loops, Family Systems Theory helps explain both the strengths and challenges families face, showing that problems are often relational rather than individual.

This perspective is especially useful in family therapy because addressing the dynamics of the entire family can be more effective than focusing only on one member. In short, Family Systems Theory highlights the family as a living, adaptive network that must continually adjust to internal and external pressures.

Life Course Theory

Life course theory, also called the life course perspective, examines how individual lives and family experiences unfold over time within social, cultural, historical, and economic contexts. Developed in the 1960s, this approach emphasizes that transitions such as marriage, childbearing, divorce, retirement, and aging do not occur in isolation. Instead, they are interconnected and shaped by age, social relationships, the timing of major life events, and broader social forces. Early experiences can also influence later outcomes, helping sociologists understand how families develop, adapt, and respond to change across time.

The relevance of life course theory becomes especially clear during periods of major social change. Much of the classic life course research focused on transformative historical events such as World War II, which shaped the opportunities, relationships, and life paths of an entire generation. Although that period may feel distant to many students today, scholars suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic may have similarly important consequences for Millennial and Generation Z cohorts. The pandemic may affect lives both through direct experiences with illness and loss and through broader economic, social, cultural, and psychological disruptions. These effects are not experienced equally: age, location, and stage in the life course all help shape how major historical events influence individuals and families over time.

Social Ecological Theory

Social ecological theory explains that individuals and families are shaped by multiple layers of their environment, from close relationships to broader social institutions and cultural values. Often associated with Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), this perspective argues that people do not develop in isolation. Instead, their lives are influenced by interacting settings such as family, school, peer groups, neighborhoods, workplaces, media, and public policy. In family sociology, this framework is useful because it shows that family life is shaped not only by what happens inside the household, but also by larger social and structural forces.

This perspective helps explain how outside conditions affect family relationships, parenting, and well-being. For example, a family may be loving and supportive, but parents who face low wages, unsafe neighborhoods, limited childcare, or lack of paid leave may still experience stress that shapes daily family life. A parent who relies on SNAP benefits may be deeply committed to providing for their children, yet still struggle with food insecurity if benefit levels are inadequate, grocery prices rise, or nearby stores have limited affordable options. In this way, even something as personal as planning meals or feeding children is influenced by broader economic conditions and public policy. Social ecological theory therefore reminds us that family outcomes are influenced not only by personal choices, but also by the larger environment in which families live.

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1.12: Conclusion

Concluding Remarks

Families are dynamic institutions shaped by history, culture, and social forces. Different theoretical perspectives provide tools for understanding family life, reminding us that no single explanation is sufficient. Together, they reveal families as complex with each lens contributing different insights—helping us see families as functional units, sites of inequality, spaces of meaning-making, and arenas of negotiation. While this chapter has introduced the sociology of the family, the next chapter turns to the diversity of family life, examining the many forms families take in contemporary society.

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2: DIVERSITY IN FAMILY LIFE

2.1: Learning Objectives

2.2: Introduction

2.3: Exploring Diversity in Family Life

2.4: Polygamy and Consensual Non-Monogamy

2.5: Cohabitation

2.6: Same-Sex Couples and LGBTQ+ Families

2.7: Living Apart Together (LAT)

2.8: Singlehood

2.9: Single-Parent Families

2.10: Blended Families

2.11: Foster Families

2.12: Conclusion

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2.1: Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Assess how well the nuclear family model represents the different types of families today
- Differentiate between monogamy, polygamy, and key types of consensual non-monogamy
- Describe trends in cohabitation and explain why couples choose to cohabit
- Explain how same-sex marriage has affected the rights and family lives of LGBTQ+ couples
- Describe the characteristics and motivations of Living Apart Together (LAT) relationships
- Identify the factors that influence why people remain single
- Explain how single-parent families form and how gender and economic factors shape family life
- Explain how blended families form and how family members navigate new roles, relationships, and challenges within their blended family arrangements
- Analyze the social, economic, and emotional factors that shape foster family experiences

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2.2: Introduction

This chapter explores the diversity of family life by focusing on two broad areas. The first part examines marriage and relationship/partnership forms—including monogamy, consensual non-monogamy (CNM), cohabitation, same-sex couples, and Living Apart Together (LAT)—as well as alternatives such as the growing share of adults who identify as single or un-partnered. Attention is then turned to less common, but equally important, household structures, focusing on single-parent families, blended families, and foster families. By studying these forms, we gain a clearer picture of the diversity of family and question assumptions about what counts as 'normal' family life.

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2.3: Exploring Diversity in Family Life

Exploring Diversity in Family Life

The Standard North American Family

As discussed in the previous chapter, the dominant ideology of what constitutes a family in the United States has historically reflected a highly class- and race-specific model of gendered family formation. This model, termed the Standard North American Family (SNAF) by sociologist Dorothy E. Smith (1993), describes a legally married heterosexual couple living together, with the adult male serving as the main wage earner and the adult female primarily responsible for caregiving and household labor.

Although the SNAF model continues to influence cultural expectations, public policy, and institutional assumptions about what families "should" look like, it no longer reflects the lived reality of most U.S. families. The growing diversity of family forms—including dual-earner couples, single-parent families, cohabiting partners, same-sex couples, and child-free adults—means this model is less representative of family life today.

A Snapshot of Family Life Today

Sociologists emphasize that the family is not a fixed concept but a social construct that reflects the cultural, political, historical, and economic conditions of its time. In the United States, the stereotypical image of family as a married husband and wife raising children has long dominated public imagination, yet as explored in this chapter, this arrangement represents only one of many forms of family life. Census data provides a contemporary snapshot of household structures in the United States. In 2022, there were approximately 89 million family groups (Hemez et al., 2024). Of these, about 65% of families with children under age 18 were headed by married parents and roughly 71% of all family groups were opposite-sex married couples. Families in the United States are more diverse than ever. In 2022, about 27% of children lived in single-parent households, 16% lived in blended families, and 5% lived with two unmarried cohabiting parents.

Societies Without Nuclear Families

Although many preindustrial societies included nuclear families, anthropologists have documented some societies in which the nuclear family was not the central family form. One well-known example is the Nayar of southwestern India, whose kinship system historically did not emphasize marriage or the co-residential nuclear family. Women could have multiple sexual partners over their lifetimes, and biological fathers typically did not assume primary responsibility for children. Instead, childrearing responsibilities were organized through the mother's extended kin network. Despite the absence of a resident father, this family arrangement functioned effectively within the Nayar social structure (Fuller, 1976).



Figure 2.3.1: Nayar/air women from Kerala, India, circa 1914. (Public Domain; unknown photographer via Wikimedia Commons).

Nuclear family formation has also been less central in many parts of the West Indies. In these contexts, when a woman and man have a child, the mother typically assumes primary caregiving responsibilities, while the father often contributes economically but may live in a separate household. As with the Nayar case, this matrifocal arrangement—centered on mothers as the primary caregivers and anchors of family life—functioned successfully in Caribbean contexts where it was practiced (Smith, 1996).

A more contemporary setting in which the nuclear family has historically been less typical is the Israeli kibbutz, a cooperative agricultural community based on collective ownership of property. In the early years of the kibbutzim (plural of kibbutz), married couples worked primarily for the collective rather than for their own households. Members typically ate in communal dining halls rather than as separate family units. Children were often raised in age-based dormitories from infancy and cared for by trained nurses and teachers, although they still spent regular time with their biological parents. Growing up in close peer cohorts, many children came to view one another as sibling-like, which tended to channel romantic relationships outside the kibbutz community (Talmon, 1972). Although the traditional family has become more prominent in many kibbutzim in recent decades, extended family ties and intergenerational contact remain highly significant, with multiple generations often maintaining close, daily interaction (Lavee et al., 2004).

In addition, contemporary intentional communities—sometimes referred to as modern communes, co-housing, and eco-villages—also illustrate alternatives to the conventional nuclear family model. These communities typically emphasize shared resources, cooperative living, and collective approaches to childcare and household labor. While they vary widely in structure and scale, many communities organize daily life around principles of mutual support and interdependence rather than strictly private, nuclear households.

These examples do not negate the fact that nuclear families are widespread and socially significant. They do, however, demonstrate that many of the core functions typically associated with the nuclear family can also be fulfilled through alternative family arrangements. If this is the case, then common concerns about the supposed "breakdown" of the 1950s-style nuclear family in contemporary America may be at least somewhat overstated. As the examples above suggest, children can and do thrive in a variety of family forms and underscores that the nuclear family is not the only viable or historically common form of family organization (Eshleman & Bulcroft, 2010).

Indeed, although nuclear families remain a common ideal in many societies, they have often been less stable in practice than popular images of the past suggest. Historically, high adult mortality meant that many marriages were cut short. In medieval Europe, for example, widespread disease, malnutrition, and other hardships contributed to relatively early death. As a result, many children could expect to lose at least one parent and were frequently raised in single-parent or step-family households (Gottlieb, 1993).

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2.4: Polygamy and Consensual Non-Monogamy

Exploring Polygamy and Consensual Non-Monogamy

Plural Marriage: Polygamy

Monogamy is a form of relationship or marriage in which an individual is married to only one person at a time. While it is the most common form of marriage globally, it is not the only socially accepted arrangement. Polygamy, or being married to more than one person at the same time, exists in varying degrees around the world, with the highest prevalence in parts of northern Africa and East Asia (Sahel and West Africa Club OECD, 2019). Within plural marriage, polygyny is the most common form historically, in which a man is married to two or more women simultaneously. Polyandry is a much rarer form of polygamy, in which a woman is married to two or more men at the same time (Altman & Ginat, 1996).

While many societies accept polygamy, the majority of people do not practice it. Even in the regions where it is most common, only an average of 11% of the population lives in arrangements that include more than one spouse (Kramer, 2020). The average plural marriage involves no more than three wives. Negev Bedouin men in Israel, for example, typically have two wives, although it is acceptable to have up to four (Griver, 2008).

In the United States, polygamy is illegal. A Gallup poll found that 20% of Americans viewed polygamy as morally acceptable in 2020, a substantial increase from earlier years. Even so, polygamy remained among the least accepted behaviors Gallup measured: it was viewed less favorably than teenage sex but more favorably than extramarital affairs (Brenan, 2020; Newport, 2020). Entering into marriage while already married to another person is known as bigamy, which is considered a felony in most U.S. states. Despite its illegality, polygyny is still practiced in certain communities in the U.S., most notably within some fundamentalist Mormon sects.



Figure 2.4.1: Brigham Young family, 19th-century polygamous family portrait. (Public Domain; Wikimedia Commons).

This 19th-century photograph shows a polygamous family associated with early Mormon plural marriage in the United States (Brigham Young family, 19th century). While relatively uncommon today, polygamy has existed in various cultural and historical contexts, illustrating the diversity of family forms.

There has been a significant increase in both media representation and public interest in polygamy and plural relationships. For example, reality television shows, such as Sister Wives, have brought polygamous lifestyles into mainstream discussion. This growing interest may be fueled by curiosity about alternative family structures that differ from the traditional nuclear family and offers insight into the complexities of maintaining multiple intimate relationships.

Other Plural Relationships: Polyamory, Open Relationships, and Swinging

In addition to marriage systems such as monogamy and polygamy, some individuals practice consensual non-monogamy (CNM). CNM describes relationship arrangements in which partners mutually agree that romantic or sexual involvement with more than one person is acceptable. In their article, Scoats and Campbell (2022) explain that although terminology and boundaries sometimes overlap, commonly discussed forms of CNM include polyamory, open relationships, and swinging.

- Polyamory—literally meaning "many loves"—involves maintaining multiple consensual romantic and/or sexual relationships simultaneously. Polyamorous relationships may be hierarchical, where partners are designated as primary and secondary based on factors such as emotional priority or cohabitation, or non-hierarchical, where partners aim to treat all relationships as equally significant. In some cases, cohabiting partners (often called nesting partners) occupy a central role in daily life. Unlike polygamy, which typically refers to legally recognized plural marriage, polyamory usually operates outside formal marriage structures and emphasizes communication, negotiated boundaries, and emotional connection among partners.
- In open relationships, partners in a committed dyadic relationship mutually agree that each person may pursue sexual encounters outside the relationship. These arrangements usually maintain a primary couple bond while permitting additional sexual connections, and the specific rules and boundaries are typically negotiated between partners.
- Swinging is typically characterized by couples who participate in organized social or sexual events where they engage in sexual activity with others outside their primary partnership. Participants generally emphasize recreational sex and often seek to avoid developing deep romantic attachments with outside partners, although social friendships may emerge within swinging networks.

Current estimates, according to Scoats and Campbell (2022), suggest that approximately 3–7% of adults in North America are actively participating in some form of CNM, and roughly 1 in 5 people report having engaged in CNM at some point in their lives. Interest in these relationship arrangements also appears to be relatively widespread. For example, research by Moors and colleagues found that about 1 in 6 single Americans expressed interest in pursuing polyamory.

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2.5: Cohabitation

Exploring Cohabitation

Cohabitation refers to two people living together in an intimate relationship without being legally married. Living together before, or instead of, marriage has become an increasingly common choice for many couples. In 2018, 15% of young adults ages 25-34 were living with an unmarried partner, up from 12% a decade earlier (Gurrentz 2018). The growth in cohabitation is often linked to a decline in social stigma surrounding the practice. According to survey data, 69% of Americans say it is acceptable for adults to live together without marriage, though 16% believe it is acceptable only if the couple intends to marry (Horowitz et al., 2019).

Cohabiting couples may choose to live together for a variety of reasons such as wanting to spend more time together or reducing living expenses by sharing costs. For many, cohabitation also serves as a trial run for marriage. Research shows that 66% of married couples who lived together before engagement saw cohabitation as a step toward marriage. Similarly, 44% of cohabiting adults who are not yet engaged or married report that moving in together represents a step in that direction (Horowitz et al., 2019). At the same time, some couples choose to cohabit with no intention of marrying, instead viewing cohabitation as an alternative to marriage or as a relationship form that better fits their personal, economic, or ideological preferences.

While couples may use this time to work out the kinks of a relationship before they commit to marriage, research indicates that cohabitation has little effect on the success of a marriage. In fact, those who do not cohabit before marriage have slightly better rates of remaining married for more than ten years (Jayson 2010). Moreover, cohabitation may contribute to the increase in the number of men and women who delay marriage. In 2024, the median age at first marriage was 28.6 years for women and 30.2 years for men (USAFacts 2025). This represents an increase from 2010, when the median age at first marriage was 26.1 for women and 28.2 for men (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025).

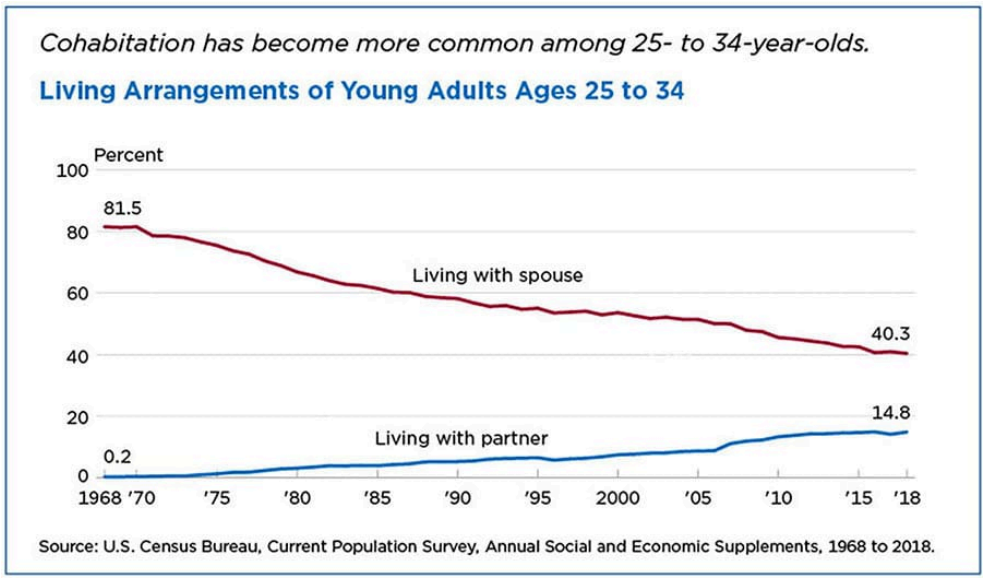


Figure 2.5.1: Living arrangements of adults ages 25–34, 2018. (Public Domain; U.S. Census Bureau).

As shown in this graph of the living arrangements of young adults, marriage has become less common, while cohabitation has increased. At the same time, the overall share of young adults living with either a spouse or an unmarried partner has declined (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

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2.6: Same-Sex Couples and LGBTQ+ Families

Exploring Same-Sex Couples and LGBTQ+ Families

The number of same-sex couples has grown over the few decades. Nationally, same-sex couple households make up 1.7% percent of the total partner-headed households in the United States (Hemez et al., 2024). As of 2021, there were approximately 1.2 million same-sex couple households in the U.S. In 2020, among all U.S. coupled households, female same-sex couples made up 0.9% and male same-sex couples made up an additional 0.8%.



Figure 2.6.1: Phyllis Siegel and Connie Kopelov, one of the first same-sex couples legally married in New York City. (CC BY 2.0; TJ Sengel).

This increase reflects several factors: the legalization of same-sex marriage, greater social acceptance of people who identify as LGBTQ+, and more openness in sharing one's sexual identity.

While many opposite-sex couples have children biologically, LGBTQ+ couples often face biological and structural barriers to biological parenting. Same-sex couples, in particular, are more likely than opposite-sex couples to build families through adoption or fostering. Studies show that same-sex couples are about four times more likely to adopt and six times more likely to foster than opposite-sex couples (Taylor, 2020). This topic will be explored in the chapter "Childlessness, Childfree Lives, and Pathways to Parenthood" and highlights the diverse ways families are formed.

Legal Recognition

The 2015 Obergefell v. Hodges Supreme Court decision, which legalized same-sex marriage nationwide, extended all federally mandated spousal rights and benefits to same-sex couples. These rights include Social Security and veterans' benefits, as well as protections related to family leave. Before the legalization of same-sex marriage, LGBTQ+ partners were often excluded from such benefits. For example, a same-sex partner could be denied family leave to care for a sick spouse, or even prohibited from visiting their partner in the hospital—situations that highlighted the unequal treatment same-sex couples faced prior to marriage equality.

Chosen Families

Families, and particularly parents, can sometimes be sources of strain, rejection, fear, or trauma for LGBTQ+ individuals. As Young (2022) points out, a supportive and nurturing family environment is not the reality for all LGBTQ+ people. Many families operate within broader social contexts shaped by heterosexism—the assumption that heterosexuality is normal and superior—which, along with anti-LGBTQ+ prejudice, can contribute to exclusion and stress for sexual and gender minority youth.

This is explored in more detail in the Chapter on "Sexuality and Sexual Orientation."

As a result, many LGBTQ+ communities have chosen families—networks of friends and loved ones providing emotional and practical support—who often supplement or replace biological family relationships. These chosen families challenge traditional definitions of kinship and emphasize that love, care, and mutual commitment can define family bonds just as meaningfully as blood or marriage. Nevertheless, recent research by Reczek and Bosley-Smith (2023) found that expectations of compulsory kinship—the idea that family members are expected to stay connected no matter what—remain strong, especially between parents and adult children. As a result, many LGBTQ+ people continue to maintain family ties even when relationships involve tension or conflict. This echoes earlier sociological research by Acosta (2014) that explores how lesbian, bisexual, and queer Latinas integrate both chosen and birth families into blended, supportive kinship.

Parenting and Children's Outcomes

An analysis of eighty one parenting studies found no evidence that children raised by opposite-sex parents fare better than those raised by same-sex parents. In fact, children of lesbian couples were shown to have slightly lower rates of behavioral problems and higher levels of self-esteem (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). Beyond family dynamics, broader social policies also affect the emotional wellbeing of LGBTQ+ youth.

Content warning: This next paragraph includes a discussion of suicide and youth mental health.

Prior to the nationwide legalization of same-sex marriage, research found that suicide attempts among high school students declined in states that legalized same-sex marriage. State-level legalization was associated with a 7% reduction in reported suicide attempts among all high school students and a 14% reduction among sexual minority youth. These findings suggest that legal recognition and greater social acceptance may contribute to improved well-being among LGBTQ+ young people, although the study cannot establish that legalization alone caused the decline. (Hub staff report, 2017).

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2.7: Living Apart Together (LAT)

Exploring Living Apart Together (LAT)

Living Apart Together (LAT) refers to couples in long-term, committed romantic relationships who maintain separate households. LAT couples may be married or unmarried; what defines the arrangement is that they identify as a couple but do not share the same primary residence.

An earlier study found that about one-third of U.S. adults who were neither married nor cohabiting reported being in such a relationship (Strohm et al., 2009). More recent nationwide data on LAT relationships are limited, in part because they are often classified within the broader category of un-partnered individuals in large-scale surveys and research studies.

Sociologists identify several reasons why couples may choose to LAT (Knox, 2018). For some, the decision reflects a desire for independence and autonomy. Maintaining separate households allows partners to preserve their routines, personal space, and sense of individuality while remaining in a committed relationship. In other cases, practical constraints play a role. Employment in different cities, caregiving responsibilities for children or aging parents, and financial limitations may make it difficult—or even impossible—for both partners to live in the same household. LAT can also be tied to relationship quality. Some couples find that living apart reduces everyday conflict and helps sustain feelings of novelty and excitement in their partnership.

One example of LAT shaped by practical constraints is commuter marriage. Sociologist Danielle Lindemann (2017) studied married couples who maintained separate residences because their careers required them to live in different locations. Her research shows how changing gender roles, increasingly specialized careers, and communication technologies can make it possible for couples to sustain committed relationships while living apart (Lindemann, 2017).

Later-life partnerships are another important context in which LAT occurs. Older adults may prefer to live separately to preserve independence, protect financial resources, or avoid complicating matters related to inheritance, Social Security, or pensions. Whatever the reason, LAT arrangements are not simply transitional phases on the way to cohabitation or marriage. Instead, they represent a meaningful relationship form that expands our understanding of family diversity.

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2.8: Singlehood

Exploring Singlehood

Not all adults form partnerships. Singlehood represents a growing alternative, whether by choice or circumstance, and offers a lens into how individuals navigate independence, cultural expectations, and identity outside of marriage or cohabitation. However, being single does not mean being socially isolated or disconnected from family life. Single adults may still be deeply embedded in family networks as adult children, siblings, aunts, uncles, caregivers, friends, and members of chosen families. About three-in-ten American adults report that they are single, defined as neither married nor in a committed relationship.

Data indicate that the share of one-person households has grown significantly (Fry & Parker, 2021). As of 2022, approximately 29% of all U.S. households were one-person households (See figure 2.8.1). Households with a man living alone increased by about 8%, while those with a woman living alone increased by about 4% (Hemez et al., 2024).

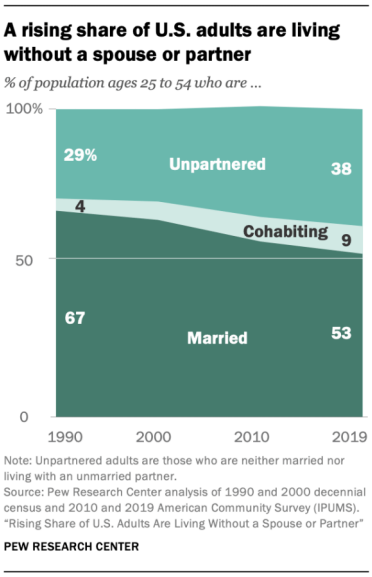


Figure 2.8.1: Rising share of U.S. adults are living without a spouse or partner. (Fry & Parker, 2021; Pew Research Center).

Who Is More Likely to Be Single?

The single population in the United States varies considerably by age, gender, and race (Brown, 2020).

About half of men under 30 are single, compared with roughly one-quarter of men ages 30 to 64. Among women, about 30% under age 30 are single, dropping to 19% for those between 30 and 60.

Racial differences also emerge: White and Hispanic adults are less likely to be single than African American adults. Moreover, research suggests that Asian Americans are the most likely to marry, while African Americans are the least likely (Venugopal, 2011).

Geographic patterns matter as well—single individuals are more likely to live in large metropolitan areas, with New York City among the highest concentrations. Perhaps it is no coincidence that New York City became the backdrop for the television show "Sex and the City", which highlighted the lives, relationships, and independence of four women navigating urban single life.

Religion also plays a role in decisions around singlehood and marriage. People who place little or no value on religion are more likely to remain unmarried than those who view religion as highly important (Bakalar, 2010).

Why Singlehood Is Increasing

Several social changes have contributed to the growth of singlehood. Declining marriage rates and later marriage mean that adults are spending more of their lives without a spouse or partner. Greater educational and economic opportunities, particularly for women, have also reduced the economic necessity of marriage, while changing cultural attitudes have made remaining single a more socially acceptable option. Economic conditions may also shape partnership patterns. For example, employment and earnings have declined among some groups of unpartnered men, at a time when expectations that men should be financially able to support a family remain influential (Fry & Parker, 2021). Importantly, the rise in singlehood is not simply the result of people postponing marriage: much of the increase reflects a growing share of adults who have never married.

Social Pressure and the Stigma of Singlehood

Although both single men and women report feeling social pressure to marry, women tend to experience greater scrutiny. Single women are frequently portrayed as unhappy or as lacking something they are expected to have, while single men are often depicted as lifelong bachelors who cannot commit. Research shows that some single women report feeling insecure or marginalized within their families when their unmarried status is disparaged (Roberts, 2007). Popular culture often reflects these sentiments—for example, the "Bridget Jones" movie series portrays the social pressures and subtle stigmas faced by single women navigating family expectations and societal norms around marriage. At the same time, women over the age of thirty-five often describe feeling secure and content with remaining unmarried, as many in this group have achieved success in education and careers. Compared to women in the 1960s, women generally report feeling more independent and more prepared to live a significant portion of their adult lives without a spouse or domestic partner (Roberts, 2007).

The key takeaway is that being single should not be viewed merely as a rejection of marriage, but rather as a legitimate lifestyle choice in which marriage is not necessarily a central priority.

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2.9: Single-Parent Families

Exploring Single-Parent Families

Single-parent households are common in the United States, making up about one-quarter of all households. In 2022, roughly 22% of children lived with their mother only, while about 5% lived with their father only (Hemez et al., 2024). Although still a smaller share overall, the number of children living with their father has grown steadily over time. In 1968, just 1% of children lived with a solo father, compared to 3% in 2008 (Livingston, 2018), and 5% by 2022. While the number and share of single-parent households in the United States rose substantially from the 1960s through the early 2000s, growth has slowed and stabilized in recent years. Single-parent families emerge from a variety of circumstances, including divorce, separation, non-marital births, or the death of a partner.

Negative media and some political commentary often portray single-parent families—especially single mothers—as evidence of moral decline or family breakdown, frequently linking them to concerns about child well-being, poverty, and social disorder (Stephanie Coontz, 1992). Sociological research, however, shows that many of these claims overlook the powerful role of structural factors such as economic inequality.

This is not to suggest that single parenthood is without its challenges. Higher rates of poverty are found among children living with single mothers, especially those who have never married. Single mothers often face financial challenges because of gender wage gaps and child-rearing costs.

Research shows that, on average, children in two-parent households often have greater access to financial and educational resources than those in single-parent households, a pattern influenced by factors such as parental age, education, and income. For instance, never-married parents are typically younger and have fewer economic resources, while divorced parents—particularly fathers—may be somewhat better positioned financially.

Yet research also highlights the resilience and adaptability of single-parent families, many of whom develop strong support networks through extended kin, friends, and community organizations. Today, single-parent families remain a significant and enduring part of the U.S. family landscape.

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2.10: Blended Families

Exploring Blended Families

About 16% of children in the United States live in blended families, which include households with step-parents, step-siblings, and/or half-siblings. This percentage has remained relatively stable since the 1980s (Wang, 2015), when the Census Bureau began consistently tracking blended family structures. Blended families became more common in the second half of the 20th century due to higher divorce rates and the growth of remarriage. Blended families can form in several ways. One or both partners may bring children from a previous marriage, cohabiting relationship, or period of single parenthood, and stepchildren may be any age.

Blended families present both opportunities and challenges as family members adjust to new roles, expectations, and household dynamics. Sociologists note that blended families often navigate complex emotional terrain, such as divided loyalties between biological and stepparents or differing parenting styles across households. Establishing a shared sense of identity and stability can take time, particularly when children divide their time between two homes. Despite these challenges, many blended families develop strong bonds and flexible relationship patterns that reflect the diversity of contemporary family life. As remarriage and cohabitation continue to evolve, blended families remain a significant and enduring part of the U.S. family landscape.

Blended families are explored in more detail in the Chapter on "Divorce and Remarriage".

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2.11: Foster Families

Exploring Foster Families

Foster families are an important part of family diversity because they demonstrate that family relationships can be formed through caregiving as well as through biology or marriage. They also draw attention to the importance of safety, stability, sibling relationships, and social support when children are unable to remain with their parents.

Historical Overview

In their recent book, Rethwisch and Marta provide a historical overview of the foster care system in the United States, noting that early child welfare efforts relied heavily on orphanages, which were large group facilities staffed by paid or volunteer adults (Rethwisch & Marta, 2025). While orphanages typically met children's most basic needs, such as food and clothing, they often failed to provide the emotional support and sense of belonging associated with family life. Many were overcrowded, underfunded, and impersonal—conditions frequently depicted in popular culture (as in the movie Annie).



Figure 2.11.1: Washington Children's Home Orphanage, Seattle, early 20th century. (Public Domain; Wikimedia Commons).

The U.S. gradually shifted away from institutional care of children toward placing children in foster families, where they could receive individualized attention and live in smaller, home-based environments.

Foster Families Today

In some cases, parents are unable to care for their children. In 2018, about three million children in the United States lived with a guardian who was neither their biological nor adoptive parent. Children may enter foster care for a variety of reasons including the death of a parent, parental illness, disability, incarceration, or hospitalization. Other common causes, sadly, include children experiencing physical or sexual abuse. Today, foster care operates in every state and is administered through state or county social services departments, reflecting a broader commitment to providing children with safer, more nurturing family-like living arrangements when they cannot remain with their biological parents.

The wide array of circumstances that lead to foster care also results in diverse caregiving arrangements involving different people and organizations. The term foster parent can be applied to relatives caring for children under agency supervision, known as "kinship foster parents," who may receive financial assistance. Non-relative foster parents are state-certified adults who care for children under agency supervision. They must follow specific regulations and typically receive financial support for the children in their care. Among the 3.1 million children in 2018 who were not living with a parent, 54% lived with grandparents, 21% lived with other relatives, and 25% lived with non-relatives. Of those living with non-relatives, 38% lived with foster parents, while the remainder lived with other non-relatives (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2019). In some cases, grandparents or other relatives assume care of children informally and temporarily, while in others, caregiving arrangements involve oversight by child welfare agencies or related state and local departments.

When children are placed into foster care, agencies and families generally try to keep siblings together. Siblings often provide each other with companionship, support in navigating social challenges, and a sense of continuity during times of change. Research indicates that children placed with siblings tend to feel closer to their foster caregivers and report greater satisfaction with their foster homes compared to those separated from siblings (Hegar & Rosenthal, 2011). By contrast, separating siblings can create worry about each other or their birth families and can slow the adjustment to a new home (Affronti et al., 2015).

Siblings may sometimes take on parental roles within the family, particularly when there are large age gaps or very young children involved. Older siblings often assume these responsibilities during times of family disruption, such as divorce or placement outside the home. These "parentified" siblings may struggle with the demands of a caregiving role while still being children themselves. Such experiences can be traumatic and are associated with compulsive behaviors, as well as long-term challenges in relationships and self-care (Lamothe, 2017).

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2.12: Conclusion

Concluding Remarks

This chapter explored a wide range of relationship and family forms in the United States, including polygamy, consensual non-monogamy, cohabitation, same-sex couples, living apart together (LAT), singlehood, single-parent families, blended families, and foster families. These examples highlight the diversity of contemporary family life and raise important questions about how family arrangements shape children's opportunities and experiences. They also demonstrate that there is no single family structure that represents the experiences of all families. In the next chapter, the focus shifts to an intersectional perspective on marriage and families, beginning with an exploration of sex and gender.

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3: SEX AND GENDER

3.1: Learning Objectives

3.2: Introduction

3.3: Defining Sex and Gender

3.4: The Gender Binary

3.5: The Social Construction of Gender

3.6: Doing Gender

3.7: Sex Assignment and Intersex Variations

3.8: Gender Identity

3.9: The Policing of Gender and Sexuality

3.10: Gender Inequality and Patriarchy

3.11: Feminism

3.12: The Gendered Division of Household Labor

3.13: Gender and the Labor Market

3.14: Conclusion

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3.1: Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Identify and explain the key dimensions of gender
- Explain the concept of the gender binary
- Explain what it means to say that gender is socially constructed
- Describe the concept of “doing gender”
- Distinguish between sex assigned at birth and gender
- Explore the concept of gender identity
- Outline the ways in which gender is policed
- Explain the concepts of gender inequality and patriarchy
- Identify the major waves of Feminism
- Analyze the gendered division of household labor
- Explore key forms of gendered workplace stratification

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3.2: Introduction

Gender is a central organizing principle in social life. It shapes identity, relationships, family roles, institutional practices, and access to power and resources. Although gender is deeply personal, its meanings are created through culture, laws, social institutions, and everyday interaction. This chapter distinguishes sex, sex assigned at birth, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. It examines the gender binary, cross-cultural gender diversity, intersex variations, and the ways gender is socially constructed, performed, and policed. The chapter also explores gender inequality, patriarchy, intersectionality, and feminism. It concludes by examining how gender structures household labor, caregiving, employment, occupational opportunities, and earnings. Throughout, families are treated as important places where gender is learned, reinforced, negotiated, and challenged.

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3.3: Defining Sex and Gender

Exploring Sex and Gender

Sex and gender raise many important questions. What is gender? How do we identify another person's gender? Is gender determined by reproductive organs and other physical sex characteristics, or is it communicated through outward cues such as clothing, hairstyle, voice, and body presentation?

Before beginning our discussion, it is useful to establish several working definitions. Although these concepts are closely related, they refer to distinct dimensions:

- Sex refers to a set of biological characteristics, including chromosomes, hormones, reproductive organs, and external anatomy. Although people are commonly classified as female or male, biological sex includes naturally occurring variations and does not always fit neatly into two distinct categories.
- Gender refers to the socially constructed meanings, roles, behaviors, expectations, and identities that societies associate with perceived sex differences. Gender varies across cultures and historical periods and shapes how people are expected to look, behave, communicate, and participate in social life.
- Gender identity refers to a person's internal understanding and experience of their own gender. A person may identify as a woman, a man, nonbinary, gender-fluid, agender, or another gender.
- Gender expression refers to how a person communicates or presents gender through clothing, hairstyle, voice, mannerisms, behavior, and other outward characteristics.
- Sexual orientation refers to a person's pattern of romantic, emotional, or sexual attraction to others. Sexual orientation is distinct from gender identity: gender identity concerns who a person understands themselves to be, while sexual orientation concerns whom they may be attracted to.

In most societies, infants are classified at birth as either female or male, usually based on visible physical characteristics. This assignment often shapes expectations about how individuals should look, behave, and identify throughout their lives. Many people identify with the gender associated with the sex they were assigned at birth, but not everyone does.

This raises additional questions: What does it mean to be a boy, a girl, transgender, or nonbinary? Have you ever felt that you were "good" at being your gender? How would you know and how did you learn what was expected of you? Is gender something people are, something they do, or both? These are some of the complex questions explored throughout this chapter.

Video: Biology! Feauturing Alok

Duration: 1 minute and 13 seconds.

In this excerpt from Biology!, Alok Vaid-Menon (they/them) uses humor to challenge rigid assumptions about biology, gender, and the body. Watch from 17:15 to 18:28 (ALOK, 2024).

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3.4: The Gender Binary

Exploring The Gender Binary

In many societies, gender has historically been organized into two categories—masculine and feminine—an arrangement commonly described as the gender binary. This framework assumes that everyone fits neatly into one of two distinct and opposing categories. It does not, however, adequately account for people whose bodies, identities, or gender expressions fall outside these classifications, including people who are intersex, transgender, nonbinary, gender-expansive, or gender-fluid.

Contemporary gender scholars challenge binary thinking by arguing that sex and gender are more complex and multidimensional than fixed either-or categories suggest. From a sociological perspective, the meanings attached to bodies, masculinity, femininity, and gender identity are shaped by cultural, historical, and social influences. Families are particularly important in this process because they often provide children with their earliest lessons about gender and communicate expectations about how boys, girls, men, and women are supposed to behave.

Rigid adherence to the gender binary can have significant social and legal consequences. Some governments require individuals to select only "male" or "female" on official documents, limiting recognition for people whose identities do not align with either category. In the United States, the Trump administration adopted a federal policy recognizing only two sexes—male and female—and directed agencies to use those categories in federal policies, forms, and identification documents. This represented a shift from the previous federal approach whereby passport applicants could select an "X" gender marker.

Video: The Complexity of Gender Identity

Duration: 9 minutes 8 seconds

In an interview for the American Sociological Association, sociologists Arlene Stein and stef shuster discuss the complexity of gender identity (American Sociological Association, 2020). They emphasize that gender cannot be understood simply as a choice between "male" and "female." Instead, gender identities develop within social contexts in which people's understandings of themselves may come into conflict with family expectations, institutional classifications, and medical frameworks that attempt to define or regulate gender.

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Gender Diversity Across Cultures

Although the gender binary is prominent in many Western societies, it is not universal. Across cultures and throughout history, societies have recognized identities and social roles that do not fit neatly within the categories of male and female.

Two-Spirit People

Two-Spirit is a contemporary, culturally specific term used by some Indigenous people in North America. It may refer to Indigenous understandings of gender, sexuality, spirituality, kinship, and community roles that do not necessarily correspond to Western LGBTQ+ categories. Its meaning varies among Indigenous nations and individuals, and it should not be used as a general label for all Indigenous people who are transgender, nonbinary, lesbian, gay, or bisexual. In some communities, people now described as Two-Spirit have historically held distinctive spiritual, ceremonial, family, or community roles.

Fa'afafine in Samoa

Samoan culture recognizes a gender identity known as fa'afafine, a term that translates approximately as "in the manner of a woman." Fa'afafine are generally people assigned male at birth who embody feminine and masculine characteristics and occupy socially recognized roles within family and community life. In many Samoan families, fa'afafine are accepted and valued contributors, particularly in caregiving, household labor, and extended-family relationships.

Although outsiders sometimes describe fa'afafine as gay men or transgender women, these Western categories do not fully capture the cultural meaning of fa'afafine identity. Samoan understandings tend to emphasize gender expression, family responsibilities, and social role rather than sexual orientation alone (Poasa, 1992).

Muxes in Oaxaca, Mexico

Among Zapotec communities in Oaxaca, Mexico, muxes are recognized as a gender category that does not fit neatly within conventional classifications of men and women. Muxes are generally people assigned male at birth who adopt feminine, mixed, or otherwise culturally distinctive gender roles. They often participate fully in family and community networks and may hold valued social, cultural, and economic roles.

The television series Eva Longoria: Searching for Mexico provides a contemporary illustration of muxe identity. In an episode set in Oaxaca, Longoria meets members of a community who describe muxes as a culturally recognized gender category (CNN, 2023). Their experiences demonstrate that gender identity cannot always be understood through Western distinctions between sexual orientation and gender identity.



Figure 3.4.1: Lukas Avendaño, a Zapotec muxe and performance artist from Oaxaca, Mexico. (CC BY-SA 4.0; Mario Patinho).

Additional Global Examples

Other cultural examples further challenge the assumption that all societies organize gender in strictly binary terms. The documentary Middle Sexes: Redefining He and She (2005) examines gender diversity across several societies. In Thailand, kathoey are widely recognized as a gender category that may include transgender women and feminine-presenting people assigned male at birth. In India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, hijras have long occupied culturally recognized gender roles with deep historical, social, and religious significance.

These identities should not be treated as interchangeable. Each has developed within a particular cultural, historical, religious, and family context. Acceptance also varies within and across societies. Nevertheless, the existence of multiple gender categories demonstrates that gender diversity is neither new nor limited to contemporary Western societies.



Figure 3.4.2: A member of the hijra community, a recognized third-gender community in South Asia. (CC BY 3.0; Michael Garten via Wikimedia Commons).

Taken together, these examples highlight a key insight from the sociology of the family: gender systems vary across cultures and families play a central role in either reinforcing binary expectations or making space for gender diversity. The existence of multiple gender categories across societies shows that the binary model is culturally influential but not universal.

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3.5: The Social Construction of Gender

Exploring the Social Construction of Gender

A social construct is a shared meaning or category that is created, maintained, and reinforced through social interaction. Laws, customs, nations, race, religion, and even ideas about knowledge and "common sense" are socially constructed. This does not mean that they are imaginary or unimportant. Rather, their meanings are produced collectively and can vary across societies and historical periods.

Culture plays a central role in creating, normalizing, and reproducing these shared understandings. The fact that meanings differ across time and place demonstrates that they are not fixed or universal truths but socially created interpretations of the world.

Gender provides a useful example. In contemporary European and American cultures, pink is commonly associated with femininity and blue with masculinity. Yet these associations have not always been the same. During earlier periods, pink was sometimes associated with boys because it was viewed as a stronger shade related to red, while blue was connected with girls through its associations with delicacy and the Virgin Mary (Kimmel, 1996). The changing meanings of these colors demonstrate that ideas about masculinity and femininity are culturally produced rather than biologically determined.

Everyday visual cues also reinforce socially constructed ideas about gender. For example, stylized images of legs may invite viewers to identify “which is the man” based on the presence of body hair. Such judgments reveal cultural assumptions about how male and female bodies are expected to look rather than natural distinctions between all men and all women (see Figure 3.5.1).

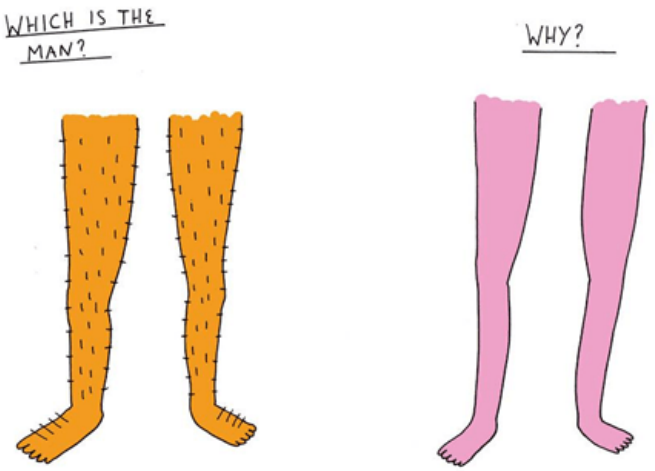


Figure 3.5.1: Gender stereotyping. (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0; C. Dunne/sickboyy via Flickr).

While gender may be socially constructed, its consequences are real. Gender is a significant dimension of identity that shapes how people understand themselves, how others treat them, and their access to status, power, and resources.

Gender Roles and Gender Stereotypes

Because sociologists suggest that gender categories are socially constructed, the behaviors associated with them are also shaped by society. Gender roles are the culturally defined expectations assigned to people based on perceived or assigned gender. They influence how people are expected to think, speak, dress, behave, express emotion, and interact with others.

Gender roles are composed of norms that people typically begin learning during childhood. For example, girls may be encouraged to appear caring, cooperative, and emotionally expressive, while boys may be encouraged to appear independent, competitive, and emotionally restrained. These expectations vary across cultures and historical periods.

Gender roles are closely connected to gender stereotypes, or generalized assumptions about the traits, abilities, and behaviors of people in different gender categories. Such stereotypes can contribute to sexism: beliefs, practices, and institutional arrangements that disadvantage people on the basis of sex or gender. Together, gender roles and stereotypes provide cultural scripts that influence how people understand themselves and evaluate others.

People sometimes respond strongly when established gender expectations are challenged by those whose identities, sexualities, or forms of gender expression fall outside conventional norms. By examining how gender is constructed and enforced, sociologists can better understand both the meanings attached to gender and the inequalities that arise from them.

Essentialist and Social Constructionist Explanations

Sociologists distinguish between essentialist and social constructionist explanations of gender. Essentialism treats differences between women and men as natural, universal, and rooted primarily in biology. From this perspective, traditional gender roles may be understood as reflecting inherent differences between the sexes.

Some Structural Functionalist accounts of the family have incorporated essentialist assumptions. Talcott Parsons, for example, argued that the family functioned most effectively when women and men performed specialized and complementary roles. Men were expected to occupy the instrumental role, which emphasized earning income, decision-making, and interaction with the outside world. Women were expected to perform the expressive role, which emphasized caregiving, emotional support, and maintaining family relationships.

Parsons viewed this division as contributing to family stability. Critics argue, however, that the approach presents historically specific gender arrangements as natural and necessary. It may therefore reinforce the existing social order while overlooking inequality, variation among families, and the ability of people of any gender to provide financial, practical, and emotional support.

A social constructionist approach instead emphasizes that gender roles are produced through culture, institutions, and social interaction. From this perspective, expectations about masculinity and femininity are learned, reinforced, challenged, and changed rather than determined solely by biology.

Gender Socialization

Socialization is the lifelong process through which individuals learn and internalize the norms, values, and expectations of society (Conerly et al., 2021). Gender socialization is the process through which people learn what their society considers appropriate for girls, boys, women, men, and people of other gender identities.

Families are among the earliest agents of gender socialization, but children also receive gender messages from teachers, peers, religious organizations, television, music, books, advertising, toys, and social media. These agents of socialization reinforce ideas about clothing, occupations, emotional expression, relationships, appearance, and behavior.

For instance, the phrase "boys will be boys" is sometimes used to excuse pushing, shoving, risk-taking, or aggression among boys. The phrase presents such behavior as natural and unavoidable, even though adults may tolerate or encourage it because it fits cultural expectations of masculinity. Similar behavior may be discouraged more strongly among girls.

Children begin recognizing gender categories and stereotypes at an early age. In the United States, for example, they may learn to associate long hair, dresses, dolls, and caregiving with femininity, while associating short hair, trucks, physical strength, and emotional restraint with masculinity. Research indicates that children become aware of many gender stereotypes during early childhood and continue navigating gendered expectations as they grow older (Weinraub et al., 1984).



Figure 3.5.2: ""I Won't Cry Daddy" (Public Domain; Lou Fine for Fox Feature Syndicate via Wikimedia Commons).

The image illustrates how boys may be taught to suppress sadness as part of traditional masculinity. The statement "I won't cry, Daddy!" reflects a gendered cultural script in which emotional restraint is treated as evidence of strength. Such messages do not simply describe how boys naturally behave; they teach boys how they are expected to behave.

Gender Socialization Before Birth: Gender-Reveal Parties

Gender socialization can begin even before a child is born. In societies that organize gender primarily through the categories of female and male, prenatal test results may influence the clothing, toys, names, decorations, and expectations selected for a child.

This process is especially visible in gender-reveal parties. These events generally announce the sex predicted through prenatal testing or imaging rather than the child's future gender identity. Pink decorations commonly signify an expected girl, while blue decorations signify an expected boy.



Figure 3.5.3: Gender Reveal Cake. (CC BY-SA 2.0; Mack Male via Flickr).

The popularity of gender-reveal parties is often traced to 2008, when Jenna Karvunidis published a blog post describing a party at which she cut into a cake containing pink icing to announce that she was expecting a girl. Karvunidis later expressed reservations about the trend, observing that such parties can reinforce restrictive assumptions about gender before a child is born (Langmuir,

2020).

Gender-Expansive Parenting

In contrast to the binary expectations emphasized by many gender-reveal parties, some families practice gender-expansive parenting. This approach seeks to provide children with greater freedom to explore clothing, toys, interests, emotional expression, and identity without treating particular choices as exclusively masculine or feminine.

Gender-expansive parenting does not necessarily mean raising children without any awareness of gender. Instead, it generally involves reducing rigid expectations and allowing children greater freedom to communicate how they understand and express themselves.

In the 2020 New Yorker documentary Raising Baby Grey, two parents in the Bronx raise their one-year-old child, Grey, using they/them pronouns and providing a broad range of clothing and play options. Their goal is to give Grey greater freedom to develop and express an identity while minimizing the pressures and potential harms associated with rigid gender categories (Long, 2020; The New Yorker, 2020).

Video: Raising Baby Grey

Duration: 9 minutes and 8 seconds

The documentary illustrates both the intentions behind gender-expansive parenting and the difficulties of practicing it within a society that strongly reinforces binary gender categories. It also raises broader sociological questions about how families negotiate gender expectations and whether parents can shield children from the gender messages communicated by schools, peers, media, and other institutions.

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3.6: Doing Gender

Exploring Doing Gender

If gender is socially constructed, an important question is how that construction happens in everyday life. In 1987, sociologists Candace West and Don Zimmerman introduced the theory of doing gender. They argued that gender is not simply something people possess or are. Instead, it is an ongoing social accomplishment produced through everyday interaction (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

The metaphor of a script is useful for understanding gender. Just as a playwright provides actors with lines and directions, societies provide people with expectations about how women, men, and people of other genders are supposed to behave. Individuals do not always follow these expectations, but their behavior is often evaluated in relation to them.

This comparison draws on Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, which describes social interaction as resembling a theatrical performance. According to Goffman, people present themselves before an audience and manage their behavior according to the setting, the people present, and prevailing social expectations (Goffman, 1959). Although Goffman did not develop the theory of doing gender, his work helps explain how gender is expressed and interpreted through social interaction.

Gender as an Everyday Accomplishment

According to West and Zimmerman (1987), people do gender through their clothing, grooming, speech, posture, emotional expression, occupations, household responsibilities, and interactions with others. These actions may appear to express natural differences between women and men, but they are shaped by social expectations about femininity and masculinity.

For example, the expectation that men should open doors for women can be understood as doing gender. The act is commonly framed as chivalrous and therefore masculine. At the same time, it may reproduce the idea that women are physically vulnerable and require male protection. Through the interaction, both masculinity and femininity are affirmed.

Importantly, doing gender is not always deliberate. Most people are not consciously thinking about gender during every interaction. Rather, gender expectations become so familiar that they often appear natural. People are also held accountable to these expectations: others observe, interpret, approve of, question, or criticize their behavior according to prevailing ideas about gender.

The following images illustrate how gender may be done through everyday bodily practices. In the first image, a woman applies cosmetics as part of a routine culturally associated with femininity. In the second, public-transit signage discourages "manspreading," a posture associated with occupying more public space than is considered appropriate. People of any gender may wear cosmetics or sit with their legs apart, but these practices are interpreted through gendered expectations concerning appearance, posture, space, entitlement, and public conduct.



Figure 3.6.1: Cosmetics application. (CC BY 2.0; Robert Bejil via Wikimedia Commons).



Figure 3.6.2: Sign discouraging manspreading on public transit. (CC BY 4.0; Diario de Madrid via Wikimedia Commons).

Critiques and Extensions of Doing Gender

Doing-gender theory has been highly influential, but it has also been criticized and expanded. Its original formulation focused primarily on interactions organized around a male–female binary. Scholars have noted that this framework may not fully account for transgender, nonbinary, gender-expansive, or culturally specific gender identities.

Alfredo Mirandé, for example, argues that binary understandings of gender reflect culturally specific Western assumptions and should not be treated as universal (Mirandé, 2016). As discussed earlier in this chapter, societies differ in how they classify, understand, and enact gender. What counts as recognizable or appropriate gender behavior therefore varies across cultural and historical contexts.

Later scholarship has also examined how people may redo, resist, or undo gender rather than simply reproduce conventional expectations. Individuals can challenge gender norms through their appearance, relationships, division of family labor, parenting practices, occupations, and everyday interactions. Gender is therefore continually reproduced, but it is also open to negotiation and social change.

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3.7: Sex Assignment and Intersex Variations

Exploring Sex Assignment and Intersex Variations

The categories of sex and gender are related, but they are not identical. Sex assigned at birth refers to the classification usually recorded when a child is born, most often as female or male. This classification is generally based on the appearance of the infant's external genitalia. Gender, by contrast, refers to the identities, meanings, roles, and expectations that societies associate with sex categories.

Although sex assignment may appear to be a simple observation of biological fact, sociologists emphasize that it also involves interpretation. Bodies contain multiple sex-related characteristics, including chromosomes, hormones, internal reproductive structures, and external genitalia. These characteristics do not always develop in ways that fit conventional definitions of exclusively male or exclusively female bodies.

The classification made at birth also has important social consequences. Once a child is assigned female or male, families and institutions may select a name, pronouns, clothing, toys, activities, and expectations associated with that category. Sex assignment therefore often marks the beginning of gender socialization within the family.

How Sex Is Assigned at Birth

Most infants are born with external genitalia that medical professionals classify as typically female or typically male. Some infants, however, are born with sex characteristics that do not fit conventional expectations for either category. Other variations are not visible at birth and may be discovered only during puberty, fertility testing, medical treatment, or adulthood.

Sex classification can involve several bodily characteristics:

- chromosomes, such as XX, XY, or other patterns;
- gonads, including ovaries or testes;
- internal reproductive anatomy;
- hormone production and responsiveness; and
- external genitalia.

These traits do not always align in the ways assumed by a strictly binary model. For example, a person may have XY chromosomes but develop typically female external anatomy because their body does not respond fully to androgens. Another person may have an XXY chromosome pattern, commonly associated with Klinefelter syndrome.

Understanding Intersex Variations

Intersex is an umbrella term for innate variations in chromosomes, hormones, gonads, internal reproductive anatomy, or genitalia that do not fit conventional expectations of exclusively female or male bodies. Historically, people with these traits were sometimes called "hermaphrodites." That term is now considered inaccurate and stigmatizing when applied to humans. Some medical professionals use the term differences of sex development or disorders of sex development, commonly abbreviated as DSD. Language preferences vary: some people use DSD, some prefer intersex or variations in sex characteristics, and others identify primarily by a specific diagnosis.

The existence of intersex variations does not mean that bodies are imaginary or that biology is unimportant. Rather, it demonstrates that biological sex is more complex than a simple division into two completely separate categories. Moreover, the presence of such variations does not mean that every person rejects being identified as a woman or a man. Many intersex people identify as female or male, while some identify as nonbinary or another gender.

The Quigley Scale

The Quigley Scale was developed by Charmian Quigley and colleagues to describe variation in external genital development

associated specifically with androgen insensitivity syndrome (Quigley et al., 1995). It ranges from external genitalia that appear typically male to external genitalia that appear typically female, with several forms of variation between them.

The scale should not be understood as a complete classification of all human genital variation or as a universal measure of biological sex. Rather, it is a clinical tool developed to describe variations associated specifically with the body's responsiveness to androgens. It consists of six line drawings illustrating a range of external genital phenotypes associated with androgen insensitivity syndrome.

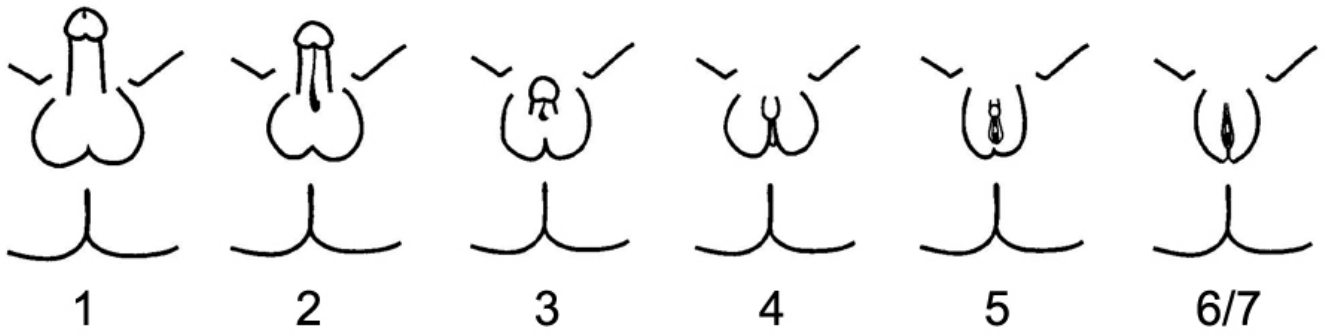


Figure 3.7.1: Quigley scale for androgen insensitivity syndrome. (CC BY-SA 3.0; Jonathan Marcus).

How Common Are Intersex Variations?

The frequency of intersex variations depends on how the category is defined. Variations involving external genitalia that are noticeable at birth are relatively uncommon. A broader definition that includes chromosomal, hormonal, gonadal, and anatomical variations produces a much higher estimate.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reports that approximately up to 1.7% of the population is born with intersex traits (OHCHR, n.d.). This broader estimate includes traits that may not be visible at birth and may never be diagnosed. Because researchers use different definitions and inclusion criteria, prevalence estimates should be presented as approximate rather than as a single undisputed figure.

Medical Authority and "Normalizing" Interventions

Historically, when an infant was born with genitalia that did not fit typical expectations for female or male anatomy, doctors and parents were often encouraged to decide quickly whether the child would be raised as a girl or a boy. In some cases, children underwent surgery intended to make their genitalia appear more typically female or male.

These interventions were shaped not only by immediate medical needs but also by social assumptions about what a normal body, childhood, and future family life should look like. Medical teams often believed that unambiguous genital appearance would help children develop a stable gender identity, avoid stigma, and eventually enter heterosexual relationships. These assumptions reveal how medicine, family expectations, sexuality, and gender norms can become intertwined.

Some procedures are medically necessary to address urgent health concerns. More controversial, however, are irreversible interventions performed primarily to alter appearance or assign the child to a conventional sex category when delaying treatment would not threaten the child's physical health.

Historically, measurements of genital size sometimes influenced whether children were assigned and surgically shaped as female or male. Dreger, for example, documents medical practices in which assumptions about the minimum size of a socially acceptable penis influenced decisions about sex assignment and surgery (Dreger 1998). In this sense, medical intervention has often quite literally reshaped bodies to fit the dominant male/female system.

Families, Disclosure, and Informed Consent

Intersex variations are particularly relevant to the sociology of the family because parents are often asked to make consequential

decisions on behalf of infants and young children. These decisions may occur soon after birth, when parents are emotionally vulnerable, unfamiliar with intersex variations, and heavily dependent on medical expertise.

Parents may be told that immediate intervention will protect their child from confusion, stigma, bullying, or future difficulty forming relationships. Yet parents may not always receive complete information about alternative approaches, the option of postponing treatment, the limited long-term evidence on outcomes, or the potential physical and psychological consequences of surgery.

Many intersex adults report that information about their diagnosis, chromosomes, anatomy, or childhood treatment was concealed from them. Some learned the full details only during adolescence or adulthood or after gaining access to their medical records (Human Rights Watch, 2017; Commissioner for Human Rights, 2015).

Critics of non-urgent childhood interventions argue that children should be allowed to participate in decisions about irreversible procedures when they are old enough to understand their options. Reported consequences of some surgeries include pain, scarring, repeated medical procedures, reduced sexual sensation, impaired fertility, and psychological distress (Human Rights Watch, 2017; Commissioner for Human Rights, 2015; OHCHR, n.d.).

The debate therefore presents families with a difficult sociological and ethical question: should parents and physicians alter a child's body to fit existing social categories, or should families and institutions expand their understanding of which bodies can be accepted as normal?

Video: I Learned I Was Intersex at 21

Duration: 7 minutes and 5 seconds

In this personal narrative, Mimi describes discovering at age 21 that she is intersex. Her experience demonstrates that information about a child's body and medical history may be controlled by parents and medical professionals for many years.

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3.8: Gender Identity

Exploring Gender Identity

Who are you? Take a moment to write down some of the identities you might use to answer that question. Your list might include your age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, political identity, social class, occupation, family background, or interests. The particular combination of identities that shapes your experiences is unique to you.

Now consider another question: How did you become who you are? Some aspects of identity may feel deeply rooted, while others are shaped by socialization, relationships, experiences, and personal choices. Sociologists examine both how people understand themselves and how identities are recognized, supported, questioned, or constrained by others.

Gender identity is an especially important part of this process. It develops within a social world in which families, schools, peers, media, religious organizations, healthcare systems, and governments communicate powerful messages about what gender means.

The Formation of Gender Identity

Gender identity refers to a person's internal sense of their gender. A person may understand themselves as a woman, a man, nonbinary, gender fluid, agender, or another gender.

Gender identity formation involves coming to recognize and understand one's gender while navigating the meanings and expectations attached to gender within society. In cultures that place considerable importance on sex assignment at birth, children are usually socialized according to the gender associated with that assignment. Families and other agents of socialization, such as schools, teach children what is expected of girls and boys through names, pronouns, clothing, toys, activities, emotional expectations, and family responsibilities.

While socialization influences how people understand and express gender, it does not fully determine gender identity. Research suggests that gender identity develops through a complex interaction of biological, developmental, psychological, and social influences. Many children develop a gender identity that aligns with their sex assigned at birth, while others develop a different understanding of themselves.

Gender identity can develop at an early age. In a large study of children ages 3 to 12, Gülgöz and colleagues found that transgender children strongly identified with their current gender. Their preferences for clothing, toys, and peers generally aligned with that gender rather than with the sex they had been assigned at birth (Gülgöz et al. 2019). These findings challenge the assumption that transgender identities emerge only during adolescence or adulthood.

Cisgender, Transgender, and Nonbinary Identities

People whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth are described as cisgender, or cis. For example, a person assigned female at birth who identifies as a woman may describe herself as cisgender.

The abbreviations AFAB and AMAB mean assigned female at birth and assigned male at birth. These terms refer to the sex classification recorded at birth, not to a person's current gender identity. They can be useful when discussing how birth assignment relates to later identity or experience, but they are not identities in themselves.

Transgender, or trans, is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. For example, a person assigned male at birth who identifies as a woman may describe herself as a transgender woman. Some transgender people identify outside the categories of woman and man.

In the United States, an estimated 2.8 million people ages 13 and older—approximately 1% of that population—identify as transgender (Herman & Flores, 2025). This includes about 2.1 million adults and 724,000 youth ages 13 to 17.

Nonbinary is an umbrella term for gender identities that do not fit exclusively within the categories of woman or man. A nonbinary

person may experience their gender as both, neither, between, or beyond these categories.

Related terms include:

- Gender fluid, describing a gender identity or experience that changes over time.
- Genderqueer, a broad term used by some people whose gender identity or expression challenges conventional gender categories.
- Agender, describing people who experience themselves as having no gender or little connection to conventional gender categories.

Representation, Identity, and Culture

In the painting below, Amy Sherald's Trans Forming Liberty (2024) illustrates how gender identity, representation, and power are shaped through culture and politics. In the painting, Arewà Basit appears as a modern Statue of Liberty, reworking a national symbol to center Black trans visibility and belonging. The image challenges exclusionary ideas about citizenship, gender, and freedom, while affirming the dignity of trans lives in a social context marked by heightened political conflict over LGBTQ+ rights. In this way, the painting connects personal identity to broader struggles over recognition, equality, and social inclusion.



Figure 3.8.1: Amy Sherald's Trans Forming Liberty, 2024, oil on linen. (Copyright © Amy Sherald; courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth; photo by Kelvin Bulluck). 312.4 x 194.3 x 6.4 cm / 123 x 76 1/2 x 2 1/2 inches.

Transition and Gender Expression

Some transgender and nonbinary people undertake a social transition, which may involve changing their name, pronouns, clothing, hairstyle, or gender presentation. Others pursue a legal transition, such as changing the name or gender marker on official documents. A medical transition may include hormone therapy, surgery, or other forms of gender-affirming healthcare.

Not every transgender person transitions in the same way and some do not pursue social, legal, or medical transition. Medical intervention is not required for a person's gender identity to be valid. Decisions about transition are shaped by personal preference as well as access to healthcare, family support, finances, safety, age, and legal restrictions.

Transgender people express gender in many different ways, just as cisgender people do. Some identify within the gender binary as women or men, while others describe themselves as nonbinary, transfeminine, transmasculine, genderqueer, or another identity. Transfeminine and transmasculine are broad terms that may describe a person's identity, direction of transition, or relationship to femininity or masculinity; they are not exact equivalents of transgender woman and transgender man.

Some transgender people experience pressure to pass, meaning that others perceive them as cisgender. Passing may provide

recognition, privacy, or protection from discrimination. However, it also reflects narrow cultural expectations about how women and men are supposed to look and behave. Not every transgender person can or wishes to pass, and no one's identity depends on whether others correctly recognize it.

Sociological Insight: Does Everyone Have a Gender?

Sociologist Canton Winer introduces the concept of compulsory gender, the assumption that everyone does, and should, have a gender identity. Winer's idea of gender detachment challenges this assumption by describing people who experience gender as irrelevant, absent, or not personally meaningful. This perspective extends the discussion of agender and nonbinary identities by asking students to consider not only how gender categories are socially constructed, but also how the expectation that everyone must have a gender may itself be socially constructed (Winer, 2025).

Gender Identity and Family Life

Gender identity is closely connected to family life. Families, as social institutions, are often among the first to assign gendered meanings to a child's body, name, clothing, behavior, and future. They may also be among the first places in which a person communicates that their gender identity differs from family expectations.

Family responses vary considerably. Some families affirm a person's name, pronouns, clothing, and identity, while others respond with confusion, denial, pressure to conform, or rejection. These reactions can influence family relationships, emotional well-being, housing stability, access to healthcare, and a person's willingness to disclose their identity.

Family life is also shaped by the broader legal and political environment. For some transgender and nonbinary people, and for families raising transgender children, decisions about where to live are connected to safety, school policy, healthcare access, and legal recognition. There is not yet a reliable national estimate of how many transgender people or families have left the United States, or moved from one state to another, because of anti-trans laws. Recent surveys suggest, however, that relocation has become an important issue: the 2022 U.S. Transgender Survey found that nearly half of respondents had thought about moving to another state and 5% had done so because of state laws targeting transgender people for unequal treatment (James et al., 2024).

Transgender and nonbinary people may also renegotiate family terms and relationships. Words such as daughter, son, sister, brother, mother, father, aunt, and uncle carry gendered meanings. Families may adopt different names or gender-neutral terms that more accurately reflect a family member's identity.

From a sociological perspective, these experiences show that gender identity is not only personal. It is also relational. A person's identity is recognized—or denied—through interactions with parents, siblings, partners, children, extended family members, and other social institutions, such as schools and the workplace.

Misgendering, Deadnaming, and Pronouns

Navigating a society organized around binary gender expectations can create social and emotional strain for people whose identities fall outside or cross those categories. One common form of invalidation is misgendering, which occurs when someone refers to a person using language or pronouns that do not correspond with that person's gender identity (Kapusta, 2016).

Have you ever had someone make an incorrect assumption about your gender? Although an occasional mistake may be unintentional, repeated or deliberate misgendering can communicate that a person's identity is not recognized or respected.

Many, though not all, people who transition adopt a name that better reflects their identity. Deadnaming occurs when someone refers to a transgender person by a former name that the person no longer uses. Like misgendering, deadnaming may be accidental, but deliberate or repeated use can function as a rejection of the person's identity.

Because a person's pronouns and gender identity cannot always be inferred accurately from appearance, people may share their pronouns during introductions, in email signatures, or on name labels. Asking respectfully, using people's stated names and pronouns, and briefly correcting mistakes can help create a more inclusive environment. Some people use gender-neutral pronouns such as they/them or ze/hir, although people with similar gender identities may use different pronouns.



Figure 3.8.2: Nametags with Pronouns with pronouns, 2016. (CC BY-SA 2.0; Ted Eytan via Flickr).

Including pronouns on name labels can normalize the practice of sharing pronouns rather than placing the responsibility only on transgender and nonbinary people. It can also help create a more welcoming environment by reducing assumptions based on names or appearance (The Trevor Project, 2020).

Repeated intentional misgendering or deadnaming may contribute to harassment in schools, workplaces, healthcare settings, and other institutions (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC], 2024). These practices demonstrate that gender identity is not only about how people understand themselves but also about whether others and institutions recognize that identity.

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3.9: The Policing of Gender and Sexuality

Exploring the Policing of Gender and Sexuality

Societal expectations shape how people understand and express gender from an early age. Consider the ways you sit, the clothes you wear, how you express emotion, or how much physical space you occupy. These everyday actions may feel personal or natural, but they are interpreted through cultural ideas about masculinity and femininity.

As discussed earlier, West and Zimmerman described gender as something people continually accomplish through social interaction. People do not, however, "do gender" in isolation (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Their behavior is evaluated by family members, peers, teachers, partners, employers, and strangers according to prevailing gender expectations.

Gender policing is the process through which conformity to gender norms is encouraged and departures from those norms are corrected, ridiculed, excluded, or punished. It can be subtle, such as commenting that a girl is "too loud" or that a boy is "too sensitive," or more overt, including harassment, discrimination, rejection, and violence. Through these reactions, people learn the boundaries of socially acceptable masculinity and femininity.

Families are often among the first places where gender policing occurs. Parents and relatives may praise children for gender-conforming clothing, toys, behavior, and interests while discouraging choices viewed as inappropriate for their assigned gender. Although these responses may appear minor, they teach children which expressions will receive approval and which may result in embarrassment, correction, or rejection.

Living in a Heteronormative Society

Heteronormativity is the assumption that heterosexuality is the natural, normal, or expected form of sexuality. It also assumes that people fall into two complementary gender categories: masculine men who are attracted to women and feminine women who are attracted to men.

Gender policing helps maintain heteronormativity because people whose appearance, behavior, relationships, or identities challenge these expectations may be stigmatized. LGBTQ+ people may be treated as deviant for violating the assumption that men should be attracted to women, women should be attracted to men, and everyone should identify with the gender associated with their sex assignment at birth.

The consequences of gender nonconformity are not distributed equally. In some settings, women may adopt a limited range of masculine clothing or behavior without severe sanction. Men who adopt feminine clothing, mannerisms, or emotional expressions may face more intense ridicule or harassment because femininity is often culturally devalued. Transgender, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming people may experience especially severe policing when their identities or expressions challenge the gender binary itself.

Within families, heteronormativity can shape expectations about dating, marriage, parenting, and future family formation. Parents may assume that their children will form heterosexual relationships, marry someone of another gender, and organize family responsibilities according to conventional gender roles. LGBTQ+ children and adults may therefore have to negotiate whether, when, and how to disclose identities that differ from these expectations.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Raewyn Connell developed the concept of hegemonic masculinity to describe the culturally dominant form of masculinity (Connell, 1987). This "ideal" form is commonly associated with authority, heterosexuality, independence, competitiveness, emotional control, and physical strength.

Boys are frequently monitored by family members, teachers, coaches, and peers for behavior associated with femininity. A boy may be corrected for playing with dolls, expressing fear or sadness, avoiding competitive sports, or appearing "too soft." These messages teach boys that masculinity requires distance from femininity. Sociologist C. J. Pascoe illustrates this process in her ethnographic study "Dude, You're a Fag." Pascoe found that high school students used the term "fag" not only to question

someone's sexuality but also to discipline boys who appeared weak, emotional, incompetent, or insufficiently masculine (Pascoe, 2007). The insult functioned as a form of gender policing by reminding boys that masculinity had to be repeatedly demonstrated and defended.

Few men embody every feature of hegemonic masculinity. Nevertheless, the ideal provides a standard against which boys and men are evaluated. Men who are gay, transgender, disabled, economically marginalized, emotionally expressive, or otherwise unable or unwilling to conform may be positioned as less masculine.

The term toxic masculinity refers more specifically to harmful expectations associated with masculinity, including aggression, domination, sexual entitlement, risk-taking, and the suppression of vulnerability. It does not suggest that masculinity itself is toxic. Rather, it identifies particular norms that can harm men and the people around them.

In family life, these norms may discourage men from seeking help, sharing caregiving responsibilities, or expressing emotional need. They may also contribute to unequal household labor, controlling behavior, family conflict, and emotional distance between fathers and children. As Victor Rios emphasizes in his talk "Let's Get Rid of Toxic Masculinity," boys are often taught that masculinity requires toughness, emotional restraint, and the rejection of anything associated with weakness or femininity (TEDx Talks, 2019).

TEDx Talk: Let's Get Rid of Toxic Masculinity

Duration: 11 minutes and 15 seconds

Rios explains that toxic masculinity is not simply an individual personality trait but part of a broader social system through which boys learn what masculinity is supposed to mean. These expectations can restrict emotional development, devalue femininity, and produce lasting consequences for intimate relationships, parenting, family life, and mental health.

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Emphasized Femininity

Girls and women are also pressured to perform gender, although this policing may take different forms. Connell (1987) used the term emphasized femininity to describe a culturally idealized form of femininity organized around accommodating men's interests and maintaining women's subordination within the gender order (Connell, 1987).

Girls may learn that their value depends on appearance, pleasantness, and concern for other people's feelings. They may be encouraged to take up less physical space, avoid appearing demanding, and remain agreeable even when they are uncomfortable. Within families, girls may also be assigned more caregiving and household responsibilities than boys, teaching them that attending to others is a natural part of femininity.

These expectations can have lasting consequences. Girls and women may learn to minimize their own needs, tolerate unwanted behavior, or feel responsible for maintaining harmony in families and intimate relationships. Cultural pressure to meet narrow beauty standards may also contribute to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating.

Gender policing therefore helps reproduce unequal family roles. It encourages women to perform emotional and domestic labor while encouraging men to distance themselves from caregiving and vulnerability. What appears to be a natural difference between women and men may instead reflect years of unequal socialization and reinforcement.

Gendered Sexual Scripts and the Sexual Double Standard

These gendered expectations are particularly visible in the sexual scripts and double standards that shape how men and women are expected to express sexuality. Society teaches boys and girls different cultural scripts about sex. Boys are often encouraged

to appear sexually assertive, experienced, and confident, with sexual activity treated as evidence of masculinity. Girls, by contrast, may be expected to appear desirable but sexually restrained. They may be warned against being "too forward" and judged more harshly for the same sexual behavior that earns boys social approval.

This pattern is known as the sexual double standard. It is reinforced not only by peers and media but also through family rules about dating, clothing, curfews, contraception, and sexual reputation. Parents may supervise daughters more closely than sons because they fear pregnancy, sexual violence, or reputational harm. Although such rules may be intended as protection, they can also reproduce the idea that girls are responsible for controlling sexuality while boys' sexual behavior is natural or difficult to restrain.

People may carry these different scripts into dating, marriage, and other intimate relationships. Unequal expectations about sexual initiative, desire, consent, and communication can create misunderstanding and conflict. Developing equitable relationships may therefore require partners to recognize and unlearn gendered assumptions acquired through family socialization and the wider culture.

Digital Culture and Beauty Standards

Digital platforms have expanded the reach of gender policing by making people's appearance continuously visible and open to evaluation. Beauty filters, editing tools, influencer culture, and algorithmically promoted images can create increasingly narrow standards of acceptable femininity.

These pressures can affect family life as parents and children navigate social media, appearance-based comparison, and changing beauty practices. Family members may reinforce these standards through comments about weight, skin, hair, clothing, or attractiveness, but they can also help children critically evaluate the images they encounter online.

TED Talk: How Digital Culture Is Reshaping Our Faces and Bodies

Duration: 5 minutes and 21 seconds

Elise Hu argues that beauty filters and digital platforms do not merely reflect existing beauty standards; they also produce and normalize them. She describes a technological gaze through which digitally altered faces and bodies reshape real-world expectations and reinforce the idea that appearance determines social value (Hu, 2024).

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Gendered Consumption and the Pink Tax

Gender policing also operates through consumer culture. Products are frequently designed and marketed according to binary ideas about masculinity and femininity, teaching consumers that women and men—and girls and boys—require different clothing, toys, grooming products, and personal-care items.

The pink tax refers to the tendency for products marketed to women and girls to cost more—or provide less product for the same price—than comparable products marketed to men and boys (New York City Department of Consumer Affairs, 2015). Although it is described as a "tax," it is not an official government charge. Rather, it refers to gender-based differences in consumer pricing.

Gendered pricing can begin in childhood. Families may pay more for toys, clothing, and accessories marketed to girls than for similar products marketed to boys. A study by the New York City Department of Consumer Affairs found that girls' toys and accessories cost approximately 7% more, on average, than comparable boys' products (New York City Department of Consumer Affairs, 2015). These differences show how gender inequality can become embedded in ordinary household spending.

Gendered marketing is also connected to beauty standards. Girls and women are often socialized to understand grooming,

attractiveness, and appearance-related consumption as important parts of femininity. In her TEDx talk "Pink Tax and the BS in Beauty Standards", Felicia Clark argues that beauty expectations encourage women to spend additional money attempting to meet socially constructed standards of femininity (Clark, 2019).

The following image illustrates how gendered pricing can operate even when two products have the same sticker price. Two Byly deodorants marketed to women and men are each priced at $5.99 CAD. However, the women's product contains 50 mL, while the men's product contains 75 mL. Although the prices are identical, the product marketed to women costs more per milliliter.



Figure 3.9.4: Pink tax comparison showing Byly deodorant marketed to women and men at Uniprix, 2024. (CC BY-SA 4.0; Iketsi via Wikimedia Commons).

From a sociological perspective, the pink tax illustrates how patriarchal expectations can become embedded in consumer markets and everyday family spending. The added costs associated with femininity may be particularly burdensome for low-income households. However, gendered beauty and consumption standards do not affect all women and girls in the same way.

Intersectionality and Gender Policing

Gender policing is shaped by race, social class, sexuality, disability, age, immigration status, and other social identities. Intersectionality, a framework introduced by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, explains how multiple systems of inequality interact to produce distinct experiences of privilege and disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1989).

Gender expectations are therefore not applied to everyone in the same way. A white, middle-class boy may encounter different assumptions about masculinity than a working-class Latino boy. Similarly, the femininity presented as "ideal" has often centered youth, thinness, whiteness, heterosexuality, able-bodiedness, and middle-class respectability.

Women who do not conform to this narrow ideal—including women of color, women who identify as LGBTQ+, working-class women, women with a disability, and women who reject conventional beauty standards—may be judged according to expectations that were never designed to include them. An intersectional approach therefore shows that gender policing does not operate uniformly. Its form, consequences, and intensity depend on a person's position within several overlapping systems of power.

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3.10: Gender Inequality and Patriarchy

Exploring Gender Inequality and Patriarchy

The social construction of gender and the policing of gender do not take place in a neutral environment. They occur within social systems that give some gender identities, roles, and forms of expression greater status, authority, and access to resources than others.

Gender inequality refers to the unequal distribution of power, opportunities, responsibilities, rewards, and resources on the basis of gender. It can be observed in employment, income, education, politics, healthcare, personal safety, family responsibilities, and control over reproduction.

Much of the available research on gender inequality compares women and men, which can obscure the experiences of transgender, nonbinary, and other gender-diverse people. Their limited inclusion in major datasets is itself sociologically significant because populations that are not counted may also be overlooked in research, policy, and public debate. Available evidence indicates that transgender and gender-diverse people experience disproportionate levels of violence and discrimination, as well as barriers to healthcare, employment, housing, education, legal recognition, and broader social and political participation (United Nations General Assembly, 2019; OHCHR, n.d.).

Gender Inequality Around the World

Gender inequality remains deeply embedded in laws and institutions worldwide. The World Bank's Women, Business and the Law project examines how laws and policies shape women's economic opportunities across 190 economies (World Bank, 2020). Its expanded framework measures legal protections in areas including freedom of movement and travel, employment, pay, marriage, parenthood, entrepreneurship, assets, pensions, safety, and childcare.

The 2024 report found that women had, on average, approximately 64% of the legal protections available to men when safety and childcare were included. It also concluded that no country provided fully equal economic opportunity under the expanded measure.

Other global indicators reveal similar patterns of inequality. Women are more likely than men to experience moderate or severe food insecurity, and they account for less than 15% of agricultural landholders worldwide (UN Women, n.d.; UN Women, 2025). Limited access to land and other productive resources can reduce women's economic security, bargaining power, and ability to provide for themselves and their families.

Historical Foundations of Gender Inequality in the United States

The United States often presents itself as a society based on equality and meritocracy—the belief that people advance primarily through individual ability and effort. Yet women's access to political, economic, and legal rights has historically been restricted.

Married women, in particular, were once subject to the legal doctrine of coverture, under which a wife's independent legal identity was largely absorbed into that of her husband. Women's property rights gradually expanded through state-level married women's property laws during the nineteenth century, but change occurred unevenly. The ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 prohibited denying citizens the right to vote on the basis of sex, but it did not guarantee equal voting access for all women. Many women of color continued to face racial discrimination, citizenship restrictions, poll taxes, literacy tests, intimidation, and violence, with some of these barriers not effectively challenged until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Equal Pay Act of 1963 later prohibited sex-based wage discrimination for substantially equal work, although racial and gender inequalities continued to produce especially large wage gaps for women of color. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 subsequently prohibited employment discrimination based on sex.

These reforms represented major advances, but legal equality did not automatically eliminate inequalities embedded in workplaces, families, cultural expectations, and everyday interactions. Formal rights can coexist with unequal access to income, authority, caregiving support, safety, and political influence.

Understanding Patriarchy

Patriarchy is a social system in which men, particularly socially advantaged groups of men such as those who are white, middle class, and heterosexual, hold disproportionate power and authority within major social institutions.The word literally refers to the "rule of fathers," but sociologists use it more broadly to describe systems that privilege men and masculinity while devaluing women, femininity, and gender diversity.

Patriarchy does not mean that every man has more power than every woman or that men never experience hardship. Gender intersects with race, social class, sexuality, disability, citizenship, and age. A wealthy white woman may have more social and economic power than a working-class man of color, for example. Nevertheless, patriarchal institutions tend to advantage men collectively in areas such as political representation, organizational leadership, wealth, bodily autonomy, and freedom from unpaid caregiving responsibilities.

Patriarchy is reproduced not only through deliberate discrimination but also through policies, institutional routines, cultural assumptions, and family practices that appear normal or gender-neutral. It therefore operates at structural, cultural, interactional, and interpersonal levels.

Patriarchy in Contemporary Social Life

Patriarchy continues to shape social life through interconnected forms of inequality. At the structural level, it is visible in wage disparities, occupational segregation, barriers to leadership, inadequate childcare support, and restrictions on reproductive autonomy. At the cultural level, it appears in double standards surrounding sexuality, appearance, aging, parenting, and ambition. In everyday interaction, it may be reproduced when men's knowledge is treated as more authoritative, women are expected to remain agreeable, or transgender and nonbinary people are pressured to conform to binary gender expectations.

The family is one of the central institutions through which these inequalities are both reproduced and challenged. Families teach children ideas about masculinity, femininity, authority, sexuality, caregiving, and work. They also distribute responsibilities such as earning income, managing money, caring for children and older relatives, completing housework, and providing emotional support.

In patriarchal family arrangements, men have traditionally been associated with authority, economic provision, and decision-making, while women have been associated with caregiving, domestic labor, and emotional support. Although many families have moved away from this model, its influence remains visible in expectations that women will adjust paid employment around children, remember family needs, care for aging relatives, and assume primary responsibility for maintaining relationships. These arrangements have material and emotional consequences. Unpaid caregiving can reduce earnings, retirement savings, occupational advancement, and economic independence.

Language and naming conventions can also reflect gendered assumptions. Historically, terms such as "man" and "mankind" were used to represent humanity as a whole, positioning men as the social default. Occupational titles such as "chairman" similarly treated male leadership as ordinary. Women's titles have traditionally distinguished marital status through "Miss" and "Mrs.," while "Mr." does not reveal whether a man is married. These conventions illustrate how women's identities have often been defined in relation to marriage and family status more explicitly than men's.

Patriarchal systems also establish hierarchies among gender traits. Qualities associated with masculinity—such as authority, independence, and assertiveness—are often valued more highly than traits associated with femininity, including nurturance, empathy, and caregiving. Yet boys and men who display traits coded as feminine may be ridiculed or treated as less masculine. Transgender, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming people may face additional sanctions because their identities challenge the assumption that sex, gender identity, expression, and family roles must align within a fixed binary.

Families are not merely passive reflections of patriarchy. Couples and family members may resist traditional arrangements by sharing paid and unpaid labor, supporting diverse gender identities, practicing egalitarian decision-making, and rejecting the assumption that caregiving or authority naturally belongs to one gender.

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3.11: Feminism

Exploring Feminism

Feminism refers to a diverse collection of theories and social movements that seek to understand and challenge inequalities based on gender. Feminists have addressed voting and property rights, employment discrimination, reproductive autonomy, sexual violence, unpaid care work, LGBTQ+ rights, and inequalities within marriage and family life.

Histories of feminism in the United States are often organized into a series of "waves." This metaphor is useful for identifying periods of heightened activism, but it can also oversimplify feminist history. It may suggest that one movement ended before another began, overlook activism between the waves, and center the experiences of white, middle-class women. Black women, Indigenous women, Latinas, Asian American women, working-class women, lesbians, and other marginalized groups have organized around gender inequality throughout these periods, sometimes within mainstream feminist organizations and sometimes through their own movements.

First Wave Feminism

First wave feminism began in the nineteenth century and continued until women gained the right to vote in the United States in 1920. Activists pursued voting rights, property rights, access to education and employment, and reforms to marriage laws.



Figure 3.11.1: "Votes for Women" sellers, 1908, illustrating the first wave of the feminist movement. (Public Domain; Library of the London School of Economics and Political Science).

The 1848 Seneca Falls Convention is often identified as a foundational event in the organized U.S. women's-rights movement. Its Declaration of Sentiments challenged women's exclusion from voting, education, employment, property ownership, religious authority, and public life. It also criticized marriage laws that gave husbands extensive legal and economic authority over their wives.

Under the legal doctrine of coverture, a married woman's independent legal identity was largely absorbed into that of her husband. Feminist campaigns for married women's property rights therefore challenged both gender inequality and the organization of marriage itself. These reforms gradually expanded married women's ability to own property, retain earnings, enter contracts, and exercise legal authority independent of their husbands.

Prominent white, middle-class activists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony are closely associated with women's suffrage. However, the movement was neither exclusively white nor united around race. White women reformers sometimes

compared marriage with slavery. For example, in 1853, abolitionist Antoinette Brown argued that a wife owed service and labor to her husband in a manner comparable to an enslaved person's obligation to an enslaver (Brown, cited in Cott, 2000 p. 64). Although this comparison drew attention to married women's legal subordination, it obscured the distinctive brutality of racialized chattel slavery and the experiences of enslaved Black women, whose labor, sexuality, marriages, and children were controlled by enslavers (Davis, 1983).

Black women were central to struggles for both racial and gender justice. Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862–1931), for example, was a journalist, anti-lynching activist, and supporter of women's suffrage. She documented lynching as a system of racial terror intended to preserve white supremacy (Wells, 1979).



Figure 3.11.2: Ida B. Wells-Barnett, restored portrait. (Public Domain; Mary Garrity, restoration by Adam Cuerden via Google Art Project).

Thousands of Black women also organized through the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs. They advocated for suffrage while addressing education, poverty, childcare, family welfare, racial violence, and community development. Their work demonstrates that gender inequality could not be separated from racism or the conditions affecting Black families.

The Nineteenth Amendment prohibited denying citizens the right to vote on the basis of sex, but it did not establish equal voting access for all women. Black women, Indigenous women, Asian American women, Latinas, and other women of color continued to encounter citizenship exclusions, poll taxes, literacy tests, intimidation, and violence.

Second Wave Feminism

Second wave feminism emerged most visibly during the 1960s and continued through the 1970s and early 1980s. It expanded feminist analysis beyond formal political rights to inequalities in employment, education, sexuality, reproduction, marriage, and family life.

The Black Freedom Movement provided important organizing models, legal strategies, and forms of direct action that influenced second wave feminism. Women active in civil rights organizations challenged racial inequality while also confronting sexism within activist movements. Their experiences helped shape second wave feminism and encouraged activists to apply civil-rights organizing strategies—including marches, caucuses, legal challenges, and nonviolent direct action—to gender inequality (Du Bois & Dumenil, 2005).

Ella Baker, for example, emphasized participatory leadership and helped create the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Her organizing philosophy influenced broader movements for social justice.



Figure 3.11.3: Ella Baker, 1964. (Fair use; Ella Baker Center for Human Rights).

Second wave feminists argued that experiences treated as private—such as housework, marital authority, reproduction, sexual coercion, and intimate partner violence (IPV)—were shaped by wider systems of power. The slogan "the personal is political" expressed the idea that inequalities within homes and intimate relationships were not merely individual problems.

Feminist activism contributed to changes in employment and education, greater access to contraception, the establishment of shelters for survivors of domestic violence, increased recognition of marital rape, and challenges to the expectation that women should find fulfillment exclusively through marriage and motherhood. Feminist scholars also drew attention to women's unpaid housework, childcare, and emotional labor.

The movement nevertheless contained significant racial, class, and sexual inequalities. Mainstream organizations frequently centered the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual women. Black, Latina, Asian American, Indigenous, lesbian, and working class feminists developed organizations and theories that challenged racism, economic inequality, heterosexism, and colonialism within both society and feminist movements.

Rather than being peripheral to second wave feminism, these activists helped transform feminist thought. Multiracial feminism emphasized that women did not experience gender inequality in identical ways and that gender had to be analyzed together with race, class, sexuality, and other systems of inequality (Thompson, 2002).

Third Wave Feminism

Third wave feminism emerged during the 1990s. It built upon earlier movements while questioning the idea that feminism could speak for women as a single, unified group. Third wave feminists emphasized differences among women and paid greater attention to race, social class, sexuality, disability, nationality, and gender identity.

A key feature of third-wave feminism is coalitional politics, in which people from different backgrounds work together to challenge oppression (Taylor, 2017). Rather than organizing only around one shared identity, these groups may join broader movements based on common goals.

Third wave feminism was strongly shaped by Black feminism and intersectionality. It also incorporated queer, disability, Indigenous, postcolonial, and transnational perspectives. These traditions challenged feminist theories that treated white, heterosexual, middle class women's experiences as universal.

Within the sociology of family, these perspectives expanded the study beyond a single model of marriage and domestic life. Feminist scholars increasingly examined same-sex couples, chosen families, transnational families, immigrant households, single-parent families, reproductive labor, and the ways race, social class, citizenship, and sexuality shape caregiving and family resources.

Transnational Feminism

Transnational feminism examines how gender inequality is connected to global capitalism, migration, colonialism, militarism, and inequalities among nations. It challenges the assumption that concepts developed in the United States or Europe can automatically explain the lives of women everywhere.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty criticized Western scholarship that represented women in the Global South as a single, powerless group in need of rescue. Such representations can overlook women's agency, flatten cultural and political differences, and justify paternalistic or military interventions (Mohanty, 1991). A transnational approach is particularly relevant to families. Global inequalities shape migration, remittances, domestic work, international adoption, reproductive labor, and care chains in which women leave their own families to provide paid care for families in wealthier countries.



Figure 3.11.4: Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 2011. (CC0/Public Domain; Dr. Chandra Mohanty).

Contemporary and Fourth Wave Feminism

Some scholars and activists describe feminism since approximately 2012 as a fourth wave, although the usefulness and boundaries of this label remain debated. Contemporary feminist activism frequently combines intersectional analysis with digital communication, using social media to share personal experiences, organize protests, challenge institutional abuses, and connect movements across national borders.

Issues associated with the fourth wave include sexual harassment, sexual violence, rape culture, body shaming, reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and online misogyny. Social media has enabled individuals to make experiences that were once hidden or dismissed publicly visible. At the same time, online activism can expose feminists—especially women of color, transgender people, and other marginalized activists—to harassment and abuse.

The #MeToo movement is one of the most prominent examples of contemporary feminist activism. Activist Tarana Burke began using "Me Too" in 2006 to support survivors of sexual violence, particularly girls and women of color. The hashtag became globally prominent in 2017 as millions of people shared experiences of harassment and assault. Digital activism helped reveal that sexual violence occurs across workplaces, schools, families, religious organizations, entertainment industries, and political institutions. In the article "#Me Too in the Kitchen," Harris and Giuffre use the restaurant industry to show that sexual harassment is not simply the result of a few individual offenders. Instead, it can be enabled by workplace hierarchies, organizational cultures, and industry norms that normalize or discourage reporting of abusive behavior (Harris & Giuffre, 2020).

Contemporary feminism also addresses family-related issues such as paid parental leave, affordable childcare, reproductive autonomy, maternal health, the division of housework and caregiving, intimate partner violence (IPV), and recognition of LGBTQ+ families. Gender equality involves changing how societies organize care, parenthood, bodily autonomy, and family responsibilities.

Feminism is therefore not a single viewpoint but an ongoing field of debate and collective action.

Video: Feminism Explained Simply

Duration: 1 minute and 44 seconds.

This video provides a brief introduction to feminism as a social and political movement advocating gender equality and women's rights. It offers a useful overview of feminism's central ideas and continuing relevance to social institutions, including work, politics, marriage, and family life (LondonCityGirl, n.d.)

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

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Feminism and the Sociology of the Family

Across these different periods, feminist theories and movements have challenged the idea that family arrangements are purely private or naturally determined. They have shown that marriage, parenting, caregiving, sexuality, and household labor are shaped by laws, economic systems, cultural expectations, and unequal relations of power.

Feminist sociology asks questions such as:

- Who performs unpaid household and caregiving labor?
- Who controls family income and major decisions?
- How do marriage and parenthood affect employment and economic security?
- Whose relationships and families receive legal and cultural recognition?
- How do race, class, sexuality, citizenship, and disability shape family experiences?
- How can families reproduce gender inequality and how can they challenge it?

Feminism has therefore transformed the sociology of the family by connecting experiences inside households to broader institutions and systems of inequality. It demonstrates that changes in family life are both personal and political.

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3.12: The Gendered Division of Household Labor

Exploring the Gendered Division of Household Labor

Families depend on a considerable amount of unpaid labor. Meals must be planned and prepared, homes cleaned, children supervised, appointments scheduled, relatives cared for and relationships maintained. Although these responsibilities are essential to family well-being, they are not always divided equally.

The gendered division of household labor is a central concern in the sociology of the family because it connects private family routines to wider inequalities in employment, income, caregiving, and power.

The Second Shift: Housework and Caregiving

The second shift, a term developed by sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild, refers to the unpaid housework and caregiving that many women perform after completing their paid workday (Hochschild & Machung, 1989). Decades of research show that although men's participation in household labor has increased, women continue to perform a disproportionate share of routine housework, childcare, and educational support for children.

Video: The Second Shift

Duration: 5 minutes and 57 seconds.

In this video, sociologist Arlie Hochschild explains how employed women often return home to a second round of unpaid work. The concept demonstrates that women's increasing participation in paid employment has not always been accompanied by an equal redistribution of domestic labor within families (Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2016).

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

View this YouTube Video online

Recent time-use data show that household labor remains gendered in the United States. According to the 2024 American Time Use Survey, women spent an average of 2.34 hours per day on household activities, compared with 1.67 hours for men. These activities included cooking and cleanup, interior cleaning, laundry, household management, and lawn and garden care (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025).

The kinds of work performed also differ. Women spend more time, on average, preparing food, cleaning interiors, and doing laundry, while men spend more time on lawn and garden care. Routine tasks such as cooking and cleaning must often be completed daily, whereas some traditionally masculine household tasks occur less frequently. Looking only at total time can therefore obscure differences in the predictability, urgency, and repetitive nature of domestic work.

Globally, the gender gap in unpaid labor is even more pronounced. Across OECD countries, women perform nearly twice as much unpaid work as men, while women worldwide carry approximately three-quarters of all unpaid care work (OECD, 2025; UNDP, 2024). These patterns show how gender inequality is reproduced through the largely invisible labor that sustains households, families, and communities. Within intimate relationships, an unequal division of housework and caregiving—particularly when it is perceived as unfair—can also contribute to conflict, marital strain, and lower relationship satisfaction.

Social Class and the Outsourcing of Care

The division of household labor is shaped by social class as well as gender. More affluent families may hire housekeepers,

nannies, elder-care workers, or other paid caregivers. Outsourcing can reduce the domestic workload of comparatively privileged women, but it does not eliminate the gendered organization of care. Instead, the work may be transferred to lower-paid women, including immigrant women and women of color.

Sociologists therefore examine not only how labor is divided within individual households but also how paid and unpaid care work is distributed across families and social groups. One family's ability to balance employment and caregiving may depend on another woman leaving her own family to provide that care.

The Pandemic and the Motherhood Penalty

The COVID-19 pandemic made the gendered division of household labor especially visible. School and childcare closures increased the amount of supervision, homeschooling, meal preparation, and emotional support required within homes. Mothers disproportionately absorbed many of these responsibilities, often reducing their work hours, interrupting employment, or sacrificing career opportunities (Warwick-Ching, 2020).

These patterns intensified concerns about the motherhood penalty—the disadvantages mothers may experience in wages, hiring, promotion, retirement savings, and career progression. The motherhood penalty is not caused simply by having children. It is produced by workplace expectations, limited childcare support, gendered assumptions about caregiving, and the unequal division of family labor.

The Third Shift: Creating Family Celebrations

Domestic labor often increases during holidays, birthdays, and other family occasions. In addition to paid employment and routine household work, someone must purchase gifts, plan meals, decorate, communicate with relatives, coordinate travel, and create memorable experiences for children.

Kate Prickett and Jennifer Augustine describe this additional responsibility as a maternal third shift. Their research indicates that during the holiday season, mothers spend the equivalent of an additional workweek on housework and shopping compared with fathers (Prickett & Augustine, 2025). This work is not merely practical. Mothers are often expected to create what the authors call "holiday magic"—the traditions, emotional atmosphere, and family memories that make celebrations feel special. Because the work is framed as an expression of love, it may remain invisible even when it requires substantial time, planning, and effort.

The third shift illustrates how family rituals can reproduce gender inequality. Traditions that appear spontaneous or natural frequently depend on hidden labor performed by one family member.

Cognitive Labor and Family Life

Physical tasks are only one part of household work. Families also require cognitive labor: the mental work of anticipating needs, identifying options, making decisions, organizing schedules, monitoring progress, and remembering what must be done.

Cognitive labor is often called the mental load because responsibility continues even when no visible task is being performed. Examples include remembering that a child needs new shoes, arranging medical appointments, monitoring school communications, planning meals, keeping track of medications, purchasing gifts, and noticing when an older relative needs additional support.

Completing a task is not the same as taking responsibility for it. One partner may buy groceries when given a list, for example, while the other notices what is missing, plans the meals, checks schedules, prepares the list, and ensures that the shopping occurs. The visible task may be shared while the managerial responsibility remains unequal.

Research suggests that cognitive household labor may be divided even more unequally than physical labor. Scholars use the term gendered "cognitive stickiness" to explain why household planning and organizational responsibilities tend to remain attached to women even when they work full time or earn as much as or more than their partners (Weeks et al., 2025).

Emotional Labor and Family Life

Emotional labor within families involves monitoring feelings, reducing conflict, maintaining relationships, comforting others, remembering emotionally important occasions, and creating a sense of connection and belonging.

A family member may notice tension between relatives, encourage communication, reassure an anxious child, remember birthdays, organize visits, and maintain contact with extended family. This work can strengthen relationships, but it can also become burdensome when one person is treated as primarily responsible for everyone else's emotional well-being.

Cognitive and emotional labor often overlap. Planning a child's birthday party, for example, requires logistical coordination as well as attention to the child's feelings, family traditions, social relationships, and expectations. Distinguishing the two concepts nevertheless helps reveal the different forms of invisible work involved in sustaining family life.

Family Caregiving and the Sandwich Generation

The 2025 Caregiving in the U.S. study estimates that approximately 63 million American adults—about one in four—provide ongoing care to an adult or child with a complex health condition or disability (National Alliance for Caregiving & AARP, 2020). Many caregivers combine this work with paid employment, but caregiving can result in missed work, reduced hours, declined promotions, job changes, or withdrawal from the labor force. Caregiving pressures are especially intense for the sandwich generation—adults who simultaneously support dependent children and aging parents (Miller, 1981). These workers may experience overlapping financial demands, role strain, and time pressure across employment and family life.

Feminist scholars such as Nancy Folbre (2001) argue that caregiving remains highly gendered: women continue to perform a disproportionate share of unpaid care work, particularly intensive and time-consuming care. Care is systematically undervalued because it is associated with women and treated as a private family responsibility rather than as essential social and economic labor (Folbre, 2001). Contemporary calls for a "care revolution" seek to recognize, redistribute, and support the work involved in raising children, assisting disabled family members, and caring for older adults. For example, an illuminated public display in Mexico City in 2026 depicts a woman raising her fist in protest beside the phrase "La revolución de los cuidados".



Figure 3.12.3: "La revolución de los cuidados" ("The care revolution"), Mexico City, 2026. (CC BY 4.0; Sarah Earl-Novell).

Consequences for Relationships and Family Well-Being

An unequal division of household labor can affect relationship satisfaction, stress, and conflict. Research by Aviv and colleagues found that mothers' disproportionate responsibility for cognitive household labor was associated with depression, stress, burnout, poorer overall mental health, and relationship difficulties (Aviv et al., 2025).

Perceptions of fairness also matter. Partners do not necessarily expect every task to be divided exactly in half, but dissatisfaction may develop when one person feels overburdened, unrecognized, or solely responsible for making family life function. Conflict may become especially likely when one partner views their contributions as voluntary "help," while the other carries continuing responsibility for noticing and assigning what needs to be done.

Unequal household labor also has long-term material consequences. Time spent on unpaid care can reduce paid work hours,

earnings, promotions, retirement savings, and economic independence. These effects may become especially significant following divorce, widowhood, or retirement.

At the same time, families can challenge gender inequality. Partners may make invisible labor visible, divide both planning and execution, alternate responsibility for recurring tasks, and periodically renegotiate arrangements as employment and caregiving needs change. A more equitable division of labor can expand women's economic opportunities, enable men to participate more fully in care, and support stronger relationships between partners, parents, and children.

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3.13: Gender and the Labor Market

Exploring Gender and the Labor Market

Paid employment is often seen as a system where people are rewarded for their education, skills, experience, and effort. Sociologists emphasize, however, that labor markets are also shaped by gender norms, institutional practices, family responsibilities, and unequal relations of power.

From this perspective, differences in earnings and advancement cannot be explained solely as the result of individual choices. Ideas about appropriate work for women and men shape hiring, pay, promotion, and occupational opportunities. Family arrangements also influence who can work long hours, relocate, pursue additional training, or interrupt employment to provide care.

The labor market and the family are therefore closely connected. Employment affects a family's income, health insurance, housing, retirement security, and distribution of power. At the same time, expectations surrounding marriage, parenting, and caregiving shape people's experiences at work.

Gendered Occupational Segregation

Occupational segregation occurs when social groups are concentrated in different occupations or levels of employment. Gendered occupational segregation refers to the concentration of women and men in different kinds of work.

Women remain disproportionately represented in education, healthcare support, childcare, administrative assistance, social services, personal care, and service occupations. Jobs associated with women have often been described as pink-collar occupations. Many involve work culturally associated with femininity, including caring, teaching, organizing, serving, cleaning, and attending to other people's physical or emotional needs.

Pink-collar work is not uniformly low-paid, but many female-dominated occupations are compensated less generously than occupations requiring comparable levels of education, responsibility, or skill. Feminist scholars argue that this pattern reflects the cultural devaluation of work associated with women and caregiving.

Men remain more likely to work in traditionally male-dominated fields (such as construction, engineering, technology, transportation, and skilled-trade) and to hold senior leadership positions. These patterns reflect more than individual interests; they are shaped by socialization, access to opportunities, workplace cultures, discrimination, caregiving responsibilities, and assumptions about who belongs in particular types of work.

The U.S. Department of Labor identifies occupational segregation as a longstanding driver of gender and racial wage inequality. When women and people of color are excluded from higher-paying fields and concentrated in lower-paid occupations, differences in the jobs people hold contribute substantially to overall earnings gaps.

The Glass Escalator

Men who enter occupations dominated by women may encounter assumptions that they are especially competent, authoritative, or suited for leadership. Sociologist Christine Williams (1992) used the term glass escalator to describe the invisible advantages that can propel some men toward supervisory and administrative positions in female-dominated fields such as nursing, elementary education, social work, and librarianship (Williams, 1992). The concept shows that men may retain gender-based advantages even when they work in lower-status, female-dominated occupations.

The glass escalator does not advantage all men equally. Race, sexuality, gender expression, immigration status, and social class shape whether men are welcomed, viewed as leadership material, or treated as threatening or out of place.

The Glass Ceiling and Tokenism

The glass ceiling refers to informal but powerful barriers that prevent women and members of other marginalized groups from advancing into senior leadership positions, even when they possess the necessary qualifications and experience. The barrier is described as glass because it may not be written into policy or immediately visible, yet it limits upward mobility.



Figure 3.13.1: Glass ceiling metaphor illustrating gender inequality in the workplace. (CC BY-SA 4.0; Gloriouschan via Wikimedia Commons).

Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977) examined what happens when women enter male-dominated organizations in very small numbers. She described these workers as tokens: numerical minorities who are treated as representatives of their entire social group rather than simply as individuals (Kanter, 1977). Because tokens are highly visible, their performance may receive unusual scrutiny. Their mistakes can be attributed to their gender, while their successes may be treated as exceptional. Tokenism can therefore increase performance pressure without necessarily giving women meaningful organizational power.

An intersectional perspective shows that the glass ceiling is not equally transparent or equally fragile for all women. The term concrete ceiling is sometimes used to describe the particularly entrenched barriers experienced by women of color, who may confront racial stereotypes as well as gender discrimination. Race, social class, sexuality, disability, and immigration status all shape access to mentoring, influential networks, desirable assignments, promotion, and organizational authority.

Parenthood and Employment Inequality

Family responsibilities are among the most important links between gender inequality at home and inequality in the labor market. Mothers are more likely than fathers to reduce paid work, interrupt employment, or seek flexible schedules in order to accommodate childcare and other family needs.

The motherhood penalty refers to the pattern in which mothers experience lower earnings, reduced hiring opportunities, and fewer promotions compared with otherwise similar childless women and men. Research indicates that employers may evaluate mothers as less competent or less committed, even when their qualifications are equivalent (Correll et al., 2007).

The related term "mommy track" describes the channeling of mothers into positions viewed as more compatible with family responsibilities but offering lower pay, less authority, and fewer opportunities for advancement. Such arrangements may provide needed flexibility, but they can also produce cumulative disadvantages in earnings, experience, promotion, and retirement savings.

Fathers do not generally face the same employment consequences. Some research instead identifies a fatherhood premium, in which fathers are viewed as stable, responsible, or deserving of higher earnings. These contrasting patterns reflect cultural assumptions that mothers should prioritize caregiving while fathers should prioritize paid provision.

Family policies shape the extent of these inequalities. Access to affordable childcare, paid family leave, predictable schedules, flexible work, and elder-care support influences whether workers can combine employment and caregiving without sacrificing economic security.

Gender, Emotional Labor, and Body Labor

Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983) introduced the term emotional labor to describe the management of feelings and emotional expression as part of paid employment (Hochschild, 1983). Workers may be expected to appear cheerful, calm, sympathetic, or deferential even when they feel frustrated, distressed, or angry.

Food servers, flight attendants, customer-service employees, teachers, nurses, administrative workers, and other workers who interact with the public routinely perform emotional labor. A server responding to harassment or hostility, for example, may be required to suppress justified anger and reassure the customer because maintaining a pleasant atmosphere is treated as part of the job.

Emotional labor is particularly common in occupations associated with femininity because women are often assumed to be naturally caring, patient, attentive, and emotionally available. When these abilities are treated as personality traits rather than learned workplace skills, they may not be adequately recognized or compensated.



Figure 3.13.2: Arlie Russel Hochschild, who coined the term emotional labor. (CC BY-SA 4.0; Paul572).

Sociologist Miliann Kang (2010) demonstrates how emotional labor combines with physical and technical work in nail salons. Nail technicians perform skilled beauty services while also listening to customers, managing interactions, and sometimes serving as informal confidants (Kang, 2010). Kang uses the concept of body labor to describe paid work performed directly on other people's bodies.

Many nail-salon employees are women whose working conditions are shaped by gender, race, social class, and immigration status. In addition to physical strain and emotional demands, workers may be exposed to potentially harmful chemicals. Their experiences demonstrate how apparently personal services connect affluent consumers and families to a stratified labor force of less economically secure women.

The Gender and Racial Pay Gap

The gender pay gap compares women's and men's earnings across the labor market. In 2024, women employed full time in wage and salary jobs had median weekly earnings equal to approximately 83% of men's median weekly earnings (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024).

This broad comparison is not the same as measuring unequal pay for identical work. It reflects several interconnected processes,

including occupational segregation, differences in promotion and leadership access, discrimination, work interruptions, hours, caregiving responsibilities, and the lower valuation of female-dominated work.

Pay gaps also vary considerably by race. Comparing all women with all men can conceal the particularly large disadvantages experienced by many women of color. Black and Latina women are disproportionately represented in lower-paid service and care occupations and frequently encounter the combined effects of racial and gender discrimination. In 2025, Black women working full time, year-round were paid about 65 cents, and Latinas about 58 cents, for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men (AAUW, 2025). Women of color are also disproportionately concentrated in lower-paid service and care occupations. For example, women make up the large majority of healthcare support workers, while Black workers are represented in this occupational group at a higher rate than in the workforce overall (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). These patterns demonstrate why an intersectional analysis is necessary: gender inequality in the labor market is shaped by the combined effects of race, social class, immigration status, occupational segregation, and caregiving responsibilities.

Work, Income, and Family Life

Labor-market inequality has consequences that extend beyond individual workers. Earnings influence family housing, food security, healthcare, education, childcare options, retirement savings, and the ability to leave an unsafe or unsatisfactory relationship.

Unequal earnings can also shape power within intimate relationships. A partner who earns less or has withdrawn from employment to provide care may have less control over money and fewer independent resources. Following separation or divorce, years spent performing unpaid care can leave that partner especially economically vulnerable.

At the same time, workplace inequality cannot be understood without examining family life. Employers often rely on an "ideal worker" who is continuously available, works full time, and has few interruptions from caregiving. This model assumes that someone else is handling the worker's domestic and family responsibilities. The sociology of the family therefore connects labor-market outcomes to the organization of care.

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3.14: Conclusion

Concluding Remarks

Gender is not merely an individual trait but a powerful social construct that shapes identity, relationships, and systems of inequality. Its meanings vary across cultures and historical periods, yet its consequences shape how people understand themselves, how others respond to them, and how power and resources are distributed. Families are central to this process. They teach gender expectations, organize caregiving and household labor, and influence whether diverse identities are supported or constrained. At the same time, families can challenge conventional roles through more inclusive parenting, equitable decision-making, and a fairer division of paid and unpaid work.

The concepts explored in this chapter—including social construction, doing gender, gender policing, patriarchy, intersectionality, and feminism—connect personal experiences to wider institutions. Gender inequality in homes and workplaces is not simply the result of individual choices; it is shaped by cultural expectations, public policies, and social structures. Because these arrangements are socially produced, they can also be changed.

Gender is both a deeply personal experience and a central organizing force in social life. The next chapter builds on this foundation by turning to race and ethnicity, further examining how intersecting systems of inequality shape family life and broader patterns of social stratification.

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4: RACE AND ETHNICITY

4.1: Learning Objectives

4.2: Introduction

4.3: Questioning Biological Definitions of Race

4.4: Race as a Social Construct

4.5: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity

4.6: Indigenous and Native American Families

4.7: Hispanic and Latino Families

4.8: Asian American Families

4.9: African American Families

4.10: Immigration and Family Life

4.11: Conclusion

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4.1: Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Describe why biological explanations of race have been discredited
- Explain race as a social construct
- Distinguish between race and ethnicity
- Explain how kinship systems shape family organization and social life among Indigenous communities
- Describe key cultural values among Latino families
- Examine how the model minority myth can obscure the diversity of Asian American family experiences
- Explore how historical and structural forces have shaped the diversity of African American family experiences
- Identify both the challenges experienced by immigrant families and the broader contributions immigration makes to U.S. society

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4.2: Introduction

This chapter explores how race and ethnicity shape family life in the United States. It begins by questioning biological definitions of race and emphasizing that race and ethnicity are socially constructed categories with real social consequences. These categories are closely tied to broader patterns of inequality and opportunity, including access to wealth, housing, education, healthcare, citizenship, and legal protection. In turn, these inequalities can shape family formation, parenting, caregiving, marriage, divorce, and opportunities across generations.

The discussion examines family diversity across several major racial and ethnic groups—Indigenous and Native American, Latino and Hispanic, Asian American, and African American—highlighting how historical legacies, structural inequalities, and cultural traditions shape family forms and experiences. The chapter also considers immigration as an important dimension of family life, examining migration patterns and the ways public opinion and national policy debates affect immigrant families' opportunities and sense of belonging.

This chapter show that race and ethnicity are not separate from family life; they are part of the broader social context in which families are created, supported, constrained, and understood. While race and ethnicity have long been associated with inequality and exclusion, they are also important sources of identity, cultural continuity, resilience, and solidarity.

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4.3: Questioning Biological Definitions of Race

Debunking Biological Definitions of Race

Although the terms race and ethnicity are often used interchangeably, sociologists distinguish between them. Race refers to physical traits that a society considers socially significant, whereas ethnicity refers to shared culture, such as common ancestry, language, traditions, and beliefs. Sociologists also emphasize that race is not a fixed biological reality, but a social construct shaped by historical and cultural meanings.

From a biological perspective, race has traditionally been understood as a category of people who share certain inherited physical traits, such as skin color or facial features. Historically, race was used as a classification system to divide human populations into distinct groups based on visible differences. Although human physical variation is real, anthropologists, sociologists, and many biologists have challenged the scientific validity of racial categories (Smedley, 2007). In practice, racial classifications have often relied on arbitrary and inconsistent criteria rather than clear biological distinctions. For example, a century ago, Irish, Italian, and Eastern European Jewish immigrants to the United States were often not considered white, but were instead treated as separate and inferior groups (Painter, 2010). These shifting boundaries reveal that race is not a fixed biological reality, but a socially constructed category that changes across time and place.

Consider a person in the United States who has one white parent and one Black parent. How is this person racially classified? In many cases, American society identifies that person as Black or African American, and the individual may adopt that identity as well, as Barack Obama—whose mother was white and father was African—has done (see figure 4.3.1.). This pattern reflects the legacy of the “one-drop rule,” a racial ideology that defined anyone with even one ancestor of African descent as Black. Historically, this rule was used during slavery to maintain white supremacy by drawing a strict boundary around who counted as white (Wright, 1993). Furthernore, it protected the social, political, and economic privileges attached to whiteness by preventing racially mixed people from claiming white status. In contrast, in some Latin American countries, the same individual might be classified differently, sometimes even as white. Again, these differences show that race is not a fixed biological fact, but a socially constructed category shaped by cultural and historical context.



Figure 4.3.1: Barack Obama, the first African American president of the United States. (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0; Steve Jurvetson via Flickr).

Today, research indicates that a related logic can be seen in the classification of Indigenous identity in the United States. If the “one-drop rule” expanded Blackness by defining any African ancestry as significant, federal blood quantum policies have often worked in the opposite direction by narrowing who is recognized as Indigenous. In their article "Administrative Indigenous Erasure", Avery et al. (2025) explain that the federal practice of measuring Native ancestry treats non-Native ancestry as diluting Indigenous identity, thereby shrinking the number of people eligible for tribal enrollment, federal funding, health services, and

land rights (Avery et al., 2025).

A third reason to question the biological concept of race comes from biology itself, particularly the study of genetics and human evolution. Genetically, humans are more than 99.9% alike, meaning that people assigned to different racial groups are far more similar than different (Begley, 2008). In a 2003 Scientific American article, geneticists Stephen Bamshad and Steve Olson, who contributed to research on the human genome, argued that race has no clear genetic or biological basis (Bamshad & Olson, 2003).

Video: The Myth of Race

Duration: 3 minutes and 7 seconds.

The video argues that race is not a biological reality but a social construct. Race was historically created and shaped by social, political, and economic forces, particularly to justify systems of inequality such as colonialism and slavery. Over time, these socially constructed categories became embedded in institutions and everyday life, giving race real consequences (Vox, 2014).

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

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4.4: Race as a Social Construct

Exploring Race as a Social Construct

The lack of biological evidence for distinct racial categories suggests that race is better understood as a social rather than biological concept. In sociology, race is viewed as a social construction—a category that has no fixed biological reality, but exists because societies create, recognize, and give meaning to it (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In other words, race matters not because it is biologically real, but because people attach social meaning to perceived physical differences. However, saying that race is socially constructed does not mean that it is unimportant or unreal in its effects. As the Thomas theorem reminds us, “If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572). Because societies classify people into racial categories and often treat them unequally on that basis, race has profound consequences on people’s opportunities and life chances. These consequences are especially visible in institutionalized inequality and systemic oppression in areas such as housing, education, policing, the legal system, and the workplace. As a result, racial groups with less social power are often disproportionately marginalized and excluded. For example, the documentary Pushout shows how Black girls are often punished more harshly in schools than other students, illustrating how racism and sexism intersect to reproduce educational inequality (Atlas & Morris, 2019).

Over time, racial typologies rooted in early pseudoscience have been discredited, and the social constructionist perspective has become central to how scholars understand race. For instance, major social science organizations—including the American Anthropological Association, the American Sociological Association, and the American Psychological Association—have rejected biological explanations of race.

Minority Groups

It is important to note that, in sociology, the term minority group does not necessarily refer to numerical size. Instead, minority status refers to a group’s social power, status, and access to resources. Groups such as "people of color" and "women" may be described as minority groups because they have historically experienced unequal access to power, privilege, and institutional resources compared with dominant groups, such as white men.



Figure 4.4.1: “We are not a minority!!” mural, Chicano Park, San Diego. CC BY 2.0; rizobreaker via Flickr.

The mural “We are not a minority!!,” located in Chicano Park in San Diego, includes a tribute to Che Guevara and was originally painted in 1978 as part of the Chicano Park struggle. The image challenges the term minority group by rejecting the idea that marginalized communities should be defined only by numbers or by a lower social position. Instead, the mural emphasizes power,

identity, pride, and resistance (rizobreaker, n.d.).

Multiracial Families

Multiracial families provide a contemporary example of how racial categories are negotiated within everyday family life, showing that race is not only shaped by law, history, and institutions, but also by intimate relationships, identity formation, and belonging.

Multiracial families are an important part of contemporary family life in the United States. These families may include interracial couples, multiracial children, transracial adoptees, or extended kin networks that cross racial and ethnic boundaries. Although interracial marriage is now legally protected, multiracial families may still encounter assumptions, questions, or forms of social surveillance that reveal how strongly racial categories continue to shape everyday life. At the same time, multiracial families challenge rigid racial boundaries by showing that kinship, caregiving, love, and belonging do not fit neatly into single-race categories. From a sociological perspective, multiracial families highlight how race is socially constructed not only through law and policy, but also through family relationships, identity formation, and daily interactions.

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4.5: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity

Exploring Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity

Ethnicity refers to a shared cultural identity based on common social, historical, ancestral, national, or regional experiences. An ethnic group is a subgroup whose members share a sense of common identity rooted in similarities such as history, language, religion, traditions, values, and sometimes ancestry. Ethnicity is sometimes confused with race but the two concepts are different. Race is typically based on socially defined physical differences, while ethnicity is based more on shared culture and collective identity.



Figure 4.5.1: "Native American Son" a photograph of a young Native American Pow Wow dancer in full regalia. (CC BY 2.0; Bob.Rosenberg via Flickr)

Pow Wows provide an example of how ethnicity is expressed and maintained through shared cultural practices. For many Native American communities, they are important cultural gatherings that celebrate shared heritage, identity, and tradition through music, dance, regalia, and community participation.

Like race, ethnicity is socially constructed and its meaning has changed over time. People may be identified by others or self-identify with ethnicities in complex and even contradictory ways. For example, Irish, Italian American, Russian, Jewish, and Serbian identities may all be ethnic identities, even though many members of these groups are often classified racially as white in the United States. Ethnicity continues to matter in everyday life and in institutions, including the census, diversity initiatives, nondiscrimination laws, and personal identity.

Ethnicity is also different from national origin, although the two are sometimes confused. National origin refers to a person's connection to a particular country or place of birth, while ethnicity refers to shared cultural identity. A country may contain many ethnic groups. For example, someone in the United States might refer to Vietnamese people as one ethnic group, but Vietnam is home to 54 officially recognized ethnic groups.

Shared cultural characteristics can foster a strong sense of belonging, but ethnicity is not experienced in the same way by all members of a group (Kottak & Kozaitis, 2012). Social class, gender, region, occupation, migration history, and generation all shape how ethnic identity is expressed and lived. For example, two people of Mexican descent may both identify strongly as Mexican, yet have different lifestyles, opportunities, health outcomes, and daily practices depending on whether they live in Southern California or Las Vegas, work as a college professor or a housekeeper, or occupy different class positions. In this way, ethnicity reflects both shared culture and variation within groups.

Ethnicity can also take pan-ethnic forms, in which several distinct ethnic or national-origin groups are brought together under a broader collective identity. For example, people with roots in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and neighboring countries may sometimes identify under broader categories such as Southeast Asian or Asian American, especially in the context of the United States. Similarly, people with roots in Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean may be grouped under labels such as Latino, Latina, Latinx, or Hispanic.

Finally, not everyone sees ethnicity as central to their identity. Some people may have mixed or blended cultural backgrounds, may not have maintained strong ties to a specific ancestral tradition, or may know little about their ethnic heritage (Kottak & Kozaitis, 2012). As a result, they may not feel a strong sense of connection or solidarity with a particular ethnic group. In other cases, people may practice symbolic ethnicity, meaning they express ethnic identity in occasional or selective ways rather than through deeper everyday ties to a cultural community (Gans, 1979). For example, an Irish American person might celebrate St. Patrick's Day or enjoy Irish foods, even if Irish ethnicity plays only a small role in their daily life.

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4.6: Indigenous and Native American Families

Exploring Indigenous and Native American Families

The term Native American is commonly used to refer to Indigenous peoples in the United States. When possible, this section uses specific tribal or nation names to acknowledge the diversity among Indigenous peoples.

Kinship refers to the network of socially recognized family relationships that connect people to one another. Kinship systems are central to the sociology of the family because they show that societies define and organize family relationships in different ways. Rules about descent, marriage, inheritance, caregiving, and belonging shape who is recognized as family, what responsibilities family members have to one another, and how obligations are passed across generations.

Sociologists and anthropologists often use the following categories to describe how kinship is organized:

- Matrilineal — kinship is traced through the mother's line and children are considered part of their mother's kin group
- Patrilineal — kinship is traced through the father's line and children are considered part of their father's kin group
- Bilineal (Bilateral) — kinship is traced through both the mother's and father's lines and children are recognized as part of both kin groups

Although kinship categories may seem simple, they have important consequences for how societies organize descent, marriage, inheritance, and family roles. In the United States and Canada, kinship is generally considered bilineal, meaning that descent is traced through both the mother's and the father's family lines. At the same time, many cultural practices—such as children taking their father's last name—reflect patrilineal traditions.

Social scientists also distinguish between exogamous and endogamous societies. In an exogamous society, people typically marry outside their social group, community, or locality. Exogamous marriages create ties between families and groups fostering new social, economic, and cultural relationships. In contrast, endogamy refers to marriage within a social group, community, or locality. These unions strengthen internal ties and help preserve social and economic connections within the larger group.

Another way societies organize kinship is through moieties. Within this system, the community is divided into two major kin groups, often with rules requiring members to marry someone from the opposite moiety. Moieties also frequently serve important ceremonial and ritual functions. For example, among the Iroquois, when a member of one moiety dies, members of the opposite moiety help organize the funeral and comfort the bereaved family, symbolically helping to "wipe the tears from their eyes."

Similarly, among the Tewa, a Puebloan nation in the southwestern United States, moieties play an important role in religious and ceremonial life. Men and women are expected to marry someone from the opposite moiety, and upon marriage, women are adopted into their husband's moiety (Ortiz, 1969). Through these practices, moieties help reinforce cooperation, reciprocity, and social balance within the community.

Kinship, Lineage, and Clans

Two additional concepts that help explain kinship patterns are lineage and clan. A lineage is a kin group whose members can trace their descent to a known common ancestor. Because these genealogical links are clear, lineages often help organize inheritance, marriage, and social responsibilities. A clan, by contrast, is a broader kin group whose members believe they share a common ancestor, even if they cannot trace the exact genealogical connection. Both lineages and clans are often exogamous, meaning that members are expected to marry outside the group.

Many Native American societies recognize clans, although clan systems vary across communities and may be matrilineal, patrilineal, or bilineal. Kinship systems are also dynamic rather than fixed. Over time, they adapt to social, political, and economic change, showing that kinship—like other social institutions—reflects broader transformations in society.

Examples of Indigenous Kinship Systems

In Tewa society, kinship is organized around two patrilineal clans, the Summer and Winter clans, which structure social,

ceremonial, and ritual life. As Alfonso Ortiz (1969) explains, clan membership is not based solely on birth, but must be confirmed through rituals of incorporation. After marriage, women are typically adopted into their husband's clan, reinforcing ties between the two moieties and sustaining social balance. Clan membership is also flexible. Ortiz describes a man with only daughters who adopted his eldest daughter's son into his own clan to preserve his lineage after his daughters married into other clans. Similar forms of ritual adoption also extend beyond family, as medicine people may incorporate apprentices from other clans. In this way, Tewa kinship is both structured and adaptable, helping maintain social and spiritual unity (Ortiz, 1969).

The Haudenosaunee, often called the Iroquois, are a confederation of Native nations linked by language, kinship, and political organization, including the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora. They are a matrilineal society, meaning that descent and inheritance are traced through the mother's line. Kinship is organized through clans identified by animal symbols, such as Bear, Wolf, Deer, Turtle, and Beaver. Clan members regard one another as family even when they belong to different nations, and marriage within one's own clan is prohibited. This system helps strengthen unity across the confederacy.

Haudenosaunee clan identities are also connected to oral tradition and spiritual belief. Although clans are symbolized by animals, members do not view themselves as literally descended from them. Instead, these stories reflect the deep relationship among humans, animals, nature, and spirituality. In this way, Haudenosaunee kinship shows how family organization, cultural belief, and community identity are closely intertwined.

The Navajo, or Diné, are also a matrilineal society, but their kinship system is organized somewhat differently. A Diné person is traditionally described as being born to the mother's clan and for the father's clan, while also recognizing ties to both maternal and paternal grandfathers. This reflects a broad and relational understanding of family connection.



Figure 4.6.1: "Inuit Language" a photograph showing Inuit language text and imagery. (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0; pietroizzo via Flickr)

The Diné are considered matrilineal because rights to use family land and resources are traditionally passed through the mother's line. In other words, rights to use land and certain resources are traditionally inherited from mothers to daughters. This system highlights the central role of women in organizing kinship, inheritance, and family belonging.

Poverty, Cultural Resilience, and Indigenous Erasure

Native American communities experience some of the highest poverty rates in the United States, reflecting long-standing inequalities rooted in colonization, land loss, forced displacement, and government neglect. Over centuries, Indigenous peoples were removed from their ancestral lands, disrupting traditional economies, weakening community stability, and undermining economic independence. Today, many reservations continue to face limited access to quality education, healthcare, and employment, contributing to persistent cycles of poverty. In some communities, unemployment remains far above the national average and basic needs such as clean water, safe housing, and reliable internet access are still unmet. Yet despite these structural barriers, Indigenous communities have also demonstrated enduring cultural resilience through kinship networks, tribal sovereignty, community activism, and the preservation of language and tradition.

These structural inequalities are reinforced by the broader erasure of Indigenous histories and presence in U.S. society. Recent sociological research illustrates this pattern, showing how racial ignorance can contribute to the neglect of Indigenous burial sites in the United States, even when those sites are clearly marked on maps (Bohon & Hodges, 2025). In response, many schools, nonprofits, museums, organizations, and some socially conscious companies now begin events or publications with land acknowledgments, recognizing that their institutions exist on Indigenous land. These statements are intended to raise awareness of colonization and the ongoing presence of Indigenous peoples. However, sociologists and Indigenous scholars alike emphasize that land acknowledgments should be accompanied by meaningful action—such as supporting Native communities, honoring treaty obligations, or restoring land—so that they advance justice rather than becoming token gestures.

These inequalities are not limited to reservation life. Many Native Americans live in urban areas, where poverty, discrimination, and family separation also shape everyday experiences. As Tommy Orange's acclaimed novel "There There" (2018) illustrates, these conditions can have lasting effects on identity, belonging, and community ties (Orange, 2018). Sociologists emphasize that such challenges are not the result of individual choices, but of historical and institutional systems that constrain opportunity.

Native American Names and Imagery in Sports

The use of Native American names, symbols, and imagery in sports—such as team names, mascots, and logos—is widely understood as a form of cultural appropriation and racialized representation. For much of the twentieth century, sports teams across the United States adopted names such as the Indians, Warriors, Braves, and even Redskins or Savages in order to project strength, bravery, or aggression—traits stereotypically and inaccurately associated with Indigenous peoples. Sociologists and other scholars argue that these practices reduce Indigenous cultures to simplified symbols for non-Native entertainment, erasing their diversity. These representations matter because they shape how Indigenous children see themselves and how non-Native children learn to understand Indigenous peoples, history, and belonging.

Scholars such as Adrienne Keene, C. Richard King, and Ellen Staurowsky have written extensively on this issue. Their work shows that Native mascots and team names perpetuate racial stereotypes, contribute to microaggressions, and can negatively affect the self-esteem and identity development of Native youth. In 2005, the American Psychological Association (APA) called for the retirement of Native American mascots, citing psychological harm and the reinforcement of systemic bias.



Figure 4.6.2: Sitting Bull, Hunkpapa Lakota Sioux chief, photographed by David F. Barry. (Public Domain Mark 1.0; David F. Barry via Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 4.6.3: 2010 Washington Redskins Schedule Wallpaper. (CC BY-NC 2.0; Charlie Lyons-Pardue via Flickr)

Since the civil rights era, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) has campaigned against Indigenous mascots, arguing that the "warrior savage" myth reinforces racist ideas of Native people as uncivilized and has long been used to justify assimilation and the destruction of Indigenous cultures. Although some teams have changed their names, many professional, collegiate, and K–12 school teams have continued to use Indigenous-based names and imagery.

In recent years, public pressure and Indigenous activism — including campaigns such as #NotYourMascot — have led several professional and collegiate teams to change their names and symbols (#NotYourMascot; Association on American Indian Affairs, n.d.). These movements are part of broader efforts toward decolonization and cultural respect in American society. In 2020, amid the Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd, the Washington Redskins retired their mascot and name. This change marked a significant step toward the goals of the 2018 NCAI resolution, which urged NFL teams to discontinue racist and disparaging Indigenous terminology (National Congress of American Indians, 2014).

Video: Proud To Be

Duration: 2 minutes.

The video challenges the use of Native American mascots—especially names like "Redskins"—by contrasting stereotypes with real Indigenous identities. It presents Native Americans as contemporary individuals (teachers, doctors, parents, and soldiers) to show that Native American communities are diverse, modern, and not defined by caricatures.

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4.7: Hispanic and Latino Families

Exploring Hispanic and Latino Families

Throughout this section, Hispanic and Latino are used as broad categories for people in the United States with origins in Latin America or in Spanish-speaking countries and communities. Hispanic appears most often in official U.S. data sources, while Latino is also widely used; some individuals and communities may instead prefer terms such as Latina, Latinx, or Latine. Mexican Americans are the largest ethnic group within the broader U.S. Latino population. Latino is not itself a single ethnic group, but an umbrella category that includes many diverse groups, such as Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Argentines, each with distinct histories, cultural traditions, and social experiences.

Mexican Americans are an ethnic group whose shared identity may be expressed through language, cultural traditions, religion, food, and values. Examples of ethnic identity may include speaking Spanish, celebrating holidays such as Día de los Muertos, foods such as tamales, devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe, and familism. Familism may place greater emphasis on family obligation and interdependence than cultural ideals of individualism and independence that are prominent in the United States.

Familism, Machismo, and Marianismo

Researchers have identified cultural themes such as familism, machismo, and marianismo in some Latino communities. These concepts are best understood as historically identified cultural ideals, not descriptions of all Latino families or individuals. Their meaning and influence vary across national-origin groups, generations, social classes, regions, religions, and individual families. While they can help explain some patterns of family roles and expectations, they should not be treated as fixed or universal features of Latino family life.

Familism has been identified by researchers as an important cultural value in some Latino families and communities, although its meaning and importance varies. Familism refers to a strong sense of identification, loyalty, and obligation to one's family, which often involves the prioritization of family needs over individual desires. High levels of familism can have both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, familism can foster strong social networks, emotional support, financial assistance, and shared caregiving for children and elders. It can also help preserve cultural traditions and language across generations. At the same time, strong family obligations may sometimes limit educational or career opportunities when individuals feel pressure to place family responsibilities above personal goals.

In a study of Latino family structures, Landale, Oropesa, and Bradatan (2006) found that Latino families tended to show higher levels of familism than white and African American families. This pattern was reflected in higher rates of married two-parent families, lower rates of divorce and cohabitation, and greater care for older relatives. At the same time, the authors also found differences among Latino subgroups and noted that familism may become less common across generations as families adapt to U.S. society and changing economic conditions (Landale et al., 2006).

Sociologists suggest that machismo and marianismo are gendered cultural ideals that have shaped identity, behavior, and family dynamics in some Latin American and Latino communities. Both reflect traditional expectations of masculinity and femininity and are said to have been influenced by colonial history, religion, and patriarchy.

Machismo refers to a traditional form of masculinity that can include both positive and negative dimensions. On one hand, machismo may emphasize responsibility, protectiveness, and devotion to family. Gil and Vásquez (1996) describe this more positive image as el caballero—"the gentleman"—who is honorable, self-sacrificing, and committed to his family. On the other hand, machismo can be associated with patriarchal authority, sexual dominance, aggression, and expectations of female submission (Gil & Vazquez, 1996).

Marianismo is the traditional feminine ideal often seen as complementary to machismo. Rooted in Catholic imagery of the Virgin Mary, it emphasizes purity, modesty, moral strength, and self-sacrifice. Marianismo has historically emphasized women's roles as caregivers and the expectation that they prioritize family needs and responsibilities. Together, machismo and marianismo have historically reinforced male dominance and traditional gender roles within family life, although these patterns are changing among younger generations and across diverse Latino communities (Gil & Vazquez, 1996).



Figure 4.7.1: El Machismo Mata ("Machismo Kills") by Lorena Pajares. (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0; Lorena Pajares via Flickr)

In the image above, a protest sign reading "El machismo mata" ("Machismo kills") highlights how rigid gender norms and expectations of masculinity can contribute to gender-based violence and harm, particularly against women.

At the same time, it is important not to explain Latino family life solely through culture. This kind of thinking, known as cultural essentialism, can be reductive and lead to a "culture of deficiency" perspective that blames social problems on cultural values rather than examining broader structural forces. Such explanations can obscure the influence of racism, class inequality, and unequal life chances in shaping family experiences and opportunities. As González-López and Vidal-Ortiz (2008) caution, cultural explanations are often applied to Latino communities in ways that would not be used for non-Latino groups, becoming an uncritical shorthand for explaining gender inequality through a culture-blaming lens (González-López & Vidal-Ortiz, 2008). Recognizing these limits allows for a more accurate and equitable understanding of Hispanic family diversity and experience.

Media Representations of Latino Families

Media representations play a powerful role in shaping and reinforcing racialized and gendered stereotypes about Latino communities. As the documentaries Latinos Beyond Reel (Picker & Sun, 2013) and Lights, Camera, Acción (American Masters, 2021) indicate, Latino men in film and television shows are often portrayed as gang members, criminals, or hypermasculine figures, while Latina women are frequently depicted as maids, nannies, or sexualized characters. These narrow portrayals not only reflect but also reproduce stereotypes associated with machismo and marianismo, reducing complex identities to one-dimensional images. In doing so, the media can reinforce cultural essentialism by presenting inequality as a product of culture rather than drawing attention to racism, class inequality, and discrimination within media industries and society more broadly. Challenging these misrepresentations is essential to developing a more accurate and respectful understanding of Latino families and the diversity of their lived experiences.

Modern Latina Experiences

A recent study by the Pew Research Center indicates that nearly two-thirds of Latinas say they often feel pressure either to support their families or to succeed in their jobs or careers (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2024). In addition to these work and family demands, many Latinas believe women in their community face traditional gender-role pressures: 68% say Latinas in the U.S. face significant pressure to do household chores like cooking and cleaning, 62% say they face pressure to "be beautiful," and 56% say they face pressure to marry and have children. The data show that younger Latinas, U.S.-born Latinas, and those with higher education are more likely to report these pressures than older, immigrant, or less-educated peers.

Importantly, despite the high levels of pressure, 88% of Latinas are either extremely or very satisfied (56%) or somewhat satisfied (32%) with their family life. These findings highlight how many Latinas navigate overlapping demands—work, family, and cultural expectations—while still maintaining resilience and satisfaction, underscoring the complexity of Latino family life against the

backdrop of changing gender and economic dynamics.

Structural Inequality in Latino Families: Education, Income, and Health

Latino families in the United States continue to experience persistent inequalities in education, income, and health—patterns that reflect the enduring impact of racism, discrimination, and unequal access to opportunity. These disparities stem from structural barriers built into social institutions such as schools, the labor market, and the healthcare system.

Educational Attainment: Recent data show that educational attainment among Hispanic Americans has increased significantly over the past two decades. In 2023, about one in five Hispanic adults ages 25 and older had earned a bachelor's degree or higher, up from roughly 11% in 2000 (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2024). The number of Hispanic Americans with advanced degrees has also grown substantially, increasing from about 710,000 in 2000 to nearly 2.5 million in 2021 (Krogstad & Noe-Bustamante, 2023). Despite these gains, disparities remain. In 2021, about 7% of Hispanics held a graduate or professional degree, compared with 14% of all U.S. adults (Krogstad & Noe-Bustamante, 2023). These trends highlight both the educational progress made by Hispanic communities and the continued inequalities in access to higher education.

Sociologists and demographers such as Dowell Myers and David Hayes-Bautista note a growing demographic gap between California's aging white baby boomer population and its increasingly diverse, largely Latino, youth. They emphasize that investing in equitable education and opportunity for young people is essential for the state's future. As this new generation becomes the workforce, taxpayers, and homeowners of tomorrow, their success will help sustain California's economy, social programs, and overall wellbeing.

Income: In 2023, a report published by the U.S. Census Bureau showed that real median household income for Hispanic households in the United States was $65,540, compared with $89,050 for non-Hispanic White households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). This income gap reflects long-standing structural inequalities that shape economic opportunities for Latino families. Lower wages, employment discrimination, unequal access to higher-paying occupations, and differences in educational and occupational opportunities all contribute to this disparity. While Latino workers play a vital role in industries such as construction, health care, education, agriculture, hospitality, and service work, many remain concentrated in lower-wage sectors with fewer benefits and less job security.

Healthcare: In 2025, the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics released data showing that in 2024, nearly one in four Hispanic adults ages 18–64 in the United States lacked health insurance (24.6%), the highest uninsured rate among the racial and ethnic groups reported. Although health coverage among Latino populations has improved, significant disparities persist compared with non-Hispanic White adults, whose uninsured rate was 7.9%. Barriers such as employment in jobs without health benefits, immigration-related exclusions, and language access issues continue to limit insurance coverage and access to quality health care for many Latino families (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025).

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4.8: Asian American Families

Exploring Asian American Families

Asian American refers to people in the United States with ancestry in Central or East Asia, Southeast Asia, or South Asia. This category includes groups with widely varying migration histories, family patterns, and socioeconomic experiences.

The Model Minority Myth

Asian Americans are often portrayed as having achieved the "American Dream" through high educational attainment, stable employment, and economic success. This has contributed to the widespread perception of Asian Americans as the “model minority”—a group viewed as hardworking, disciplined, and successful, whose example other minority groups are often told to emulate (Wu, 2018). This perception, however, overlooks the deep economic, cultural, and social differences that exist within Asian American communities.

The idea of Asian Americans as a model minority first emerged in the 1960s, during the civil rights era, when journalists and policymakers began portraying Asian Americans as proof that racial minorities could succeed in the United States through hard work and quiet perseverance. This narrative was often used—explicitly or implicitly—to contrast Asian Americans with Black and Hispanic Americans, suggesting that if Asian Americans could succeed, then systemic racism did not exist. It also perpetuates and reinforces racial hierarchies that pit minority groups against one another. In this way, the model minority image became an unspoken critique of African American and Hispanic communities, implying that their struggles were the result of cultural or personal failings rather than racial discrimination or structural inequality.

Sociologists, such as Ellen D. Wu (2014) and Robert G. Lee (1999), alongside legal scholar Frank H. Wu argue that this myth serves a powerful political and ideological function: it upholds the illusion of American meritocracy while denying the continued existence of racism. Meritocracy is a social system or belief that rewards people based on their effort, individual talent and hard work. Sociologists, however, critique meritocracy by pointing out that structural inequalities—such as unequal access to education, discrimination, and inherited privilege—mean that people do not begin with the same opportunities to achieve success.

In reality, the stereotype of the model minority masks the deep diversity and inequality that exist within Asian American communities, where many groups—such as Hmong, Cambodian, Laotian, and Burmese Americans—continue to face high rates poverty and educational barriers.

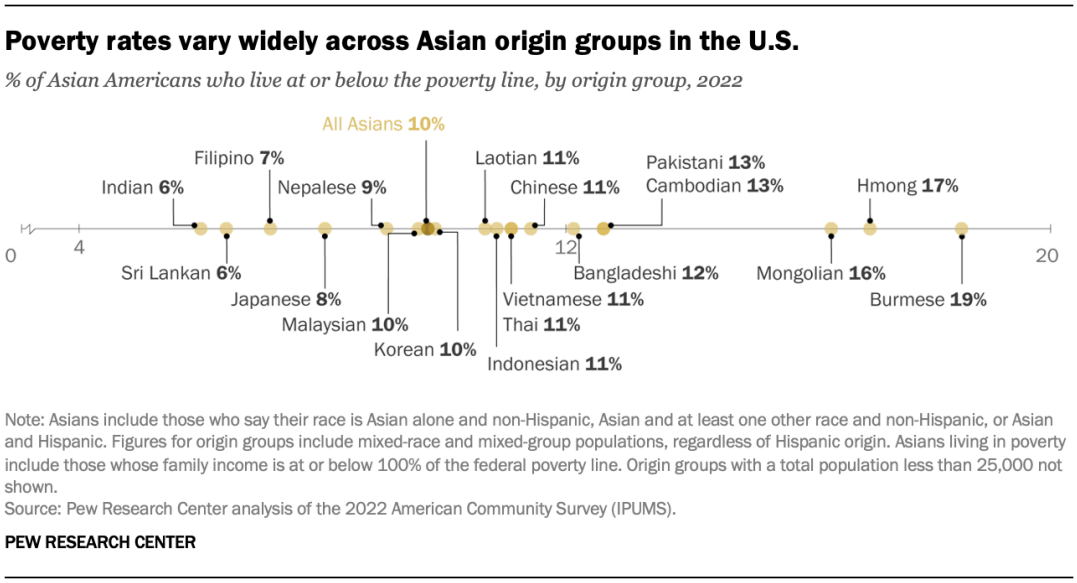


Figure 4.8.1: Poverty rates vary widely across Asian origin groups in the U.S. (Copyright; Pew Research Center)

For example, poverty rates vary widely across Asian American origin groups in the United States. While Asian Americans are often portrayed as economically successful, disaggregated data reveal substantial differences, with groups such as Burmese, Hmong, and Mongolian Americans experiencing significantly higher poverty rates than others. These patterns challenge the model minority myth by showing how aggregated data can mask inequality within racial groups (Pew Research Center, 2024).

The model minority myth also creates unrealistic expectations for Asian American youth and makes it harder to openly address the experiences of discrimination, mental health challenges, and identity struggles. Finally, the myth diminishes individual achievement by attributing personal success to stereotypes about an entire group rather than recognizing a person's unique effort, talent, or circumstances.

Unequal Returns on Education

The idea that Asian Americans are a uniformly successful group can also obscure differences in the economic returns to education. In sociology, returns on education refers to the economic benefits associated with additional schooling, such as higher earnings or greater occupational mobility. Recent research by sociologist Jennifer Lee shows that although Asian Americans often have high levels of educational attainment, this does not guarantee equal labor-market outcomes. Lee argues that Asian Americans' earnings and mobility vary by gender, nativity, national origin, place of education, and field of study, and that Asian Americans remain less likely to be promoted into leadership positions. This further challenges the model minority stereotype by showing that education does not automatically produce equal economic returns or career advancement (Lee, 2024). These patterns suggest that differences in economic outcomes cannot be explained by educational attainment alone; labor-market structures, discrimination, and unequal access to advancement also shape the rewards people receive from education.

Employment and the Bamboo Ceiling

Work, employment, and occupational mobility have been central to Asian American history and family life. Asian migration to the United States has been shaped by many factors, including economic opportunity, family reunification, education, war, displacement, and refugee resettlement. Asian-Nation, created by sociologist C. N. Le, is a useful resource for learning about Asian American history, demographics, and contemporary issues (Le, n.d.). As Le explains, Chinese migrants were drawn to the United States during the California Gold Rush, later working in domestic service, farming, small businesses, grocery work, and railroad construction. Despite their essential role in building key industries, Chinese laborers faced discrimination, exclusion, and violence, including the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.



Figure 4.8.2: Chinese Miner Statue commemorates the contributions of Chinese immigrants during the California Gold Rush. Despite their essential role in building key industries, Chinese laborers faced discrimination, exclusion, and violence (CC BY-SA 2.0; Nick Ares via Flickr).

In response to exclusion from the broader labor market, many Asian immigrants developed small businesses in ethnic enclaves such as Chinatowns. Self-employment has remained an important strategy for some Asian American families, especially after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act increased Asian immigration and expanded Asian ethnic communities in U.S. metropolitan areas. Scholars identify several overlapping reasons for Asian American self-employment, including labor market discrimination, ethnic networks, family labor, support from co-ethnic customers, and access to education, training, or financial resources. These businesses often require long hours and unpaid or low-paid family labor, showing how economic survival and family life are closely connected.

At the same time, Asian American experiences vary widely by national origin, class, language, migration history, and legal status. Some refugee communities, including Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian families, have faced high rates of poverty and reliance on public assistance. Many Korean immigrants, despite high levels of education, have also encountered barriers such as limited English proficiency and difficulties transferring professional credentials, leading some to work in low-wage jobs or open small family-run businesses (Le, n.d.).

Low-wage work, long hours, and limited access to affordable childcare can deeply affect family life. One example is the phenomenon of "satellite babies," in which immigrant parents working in the United States send infants or young children to live temporarily with relatives in their country of origin (Ng, 2019; Wang, 2018). These arrangements may draw on extended-family caregiving traditions, but they are also shaped by economic necessity, immigration circumstances, and the high cost of childcare in the United States. Such strategies can help families balance work and caregiving, but they may also create emotional distance and stress.

Most Asian Americans are conventional employees in the U.S. labor market, and their employment experiences remain diverse. Although the 1964 Civil Rights Act removed formal legal barriers to employment discrimination, Asian Americans continue to face unequal returns on education, credential barriers, and limits to advancement. The invisible barriers that restrict Asian Americans' movement into leadership and executive positions are often described as the "bamboo ceiling." This concept highlights how systemic inequities continue to shape income, job security, family stability, caregiving choices, and intergenerational mobility.

Anti-Asian Sentiment

While some Asian American groups have achieved high levels of education and socioeconomic success, these achievements have not insulated them from racial prejudice. Many continue to face bias, microaggressions, hate crimes, and exclusion based on their perceived foreignness or ethnicity (Le, n.d.). The persistence of stereotypical narratives such as “Tiger Mom” further complicates this picture. This portrayal suggests that Asian American success is the result of strict parenting, obedience, and exceptional academic discipline. Similar to the model minority myth, it also obscures the diversity within Asian American communities and downplays individual achievement by crediting success to group traits instead of recognizing personal effort and ability.

Sociologically, the “Tiger Mom” stereotype operates as a form of racialization, celebrating certain traits while still marking Asian Americans as outsiders.

References to the COVID-19 pandemic as the “China virus” or “Kung flu” fueled xenophobia and contributed to a sharp rise in anti-Asian sentiment. This rhetoric reinforced long-standing stereotypes of Asian Americans as “foreigners” or “other,” regardless of citizenship. The consequences were both immediate and far-reaching. Reports of verbal harassment and physical assaults against Asian Americans surged, with organizations such as Stop AAPI Hate documenting thousands of incidents in schools, workplaces, and public spaces (Asian American Federation, n.d.). Many Asian American businesses, especially restaurants and small shops, experienced economic losses due to boycotts and fear-driven avoidance. Socially, individuals faced heightened anxiety, isolation, and fear for their personal safety. On a broader level, this wave of discrimination exposed how racialized language from political leaders can legitimize prejudice, deepen social divisions, and undermine solidarity during times of national crisis.

Video: Asian American Federation's (AAF) Hope Against Hate Campaign

Duration: 3 minutes and 55 seconds.

This video describes the Asian American Federation’s campaign against anti-Asian hate and violence, featuring community leaders and survivors who discuss the need for safety, visibility, and support for Asian American communities (Asian American Federation, n.d.).

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

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Intermarriage and Racial Boundaries

One of the most visible ways race shapes social life is through the choice of a romantic partner or spouse. Although partner selection is often seen as a private matter, it can also attract public attention, highlighting broader issues of race, identity, and belonging (Le, n.d.).

Research consistently shows that Asian Americans have among the highest rates of intermarriage—also known as outmarriage—of any racial or ethnic minority group in the United States. Intermarriage refers to marrying someone outside of one’s own racial or ethnic group. Patterns of intermarriage vary widely across gender, national origin, generation, and social class.

Interracial relationships among Asian Americans are not a new phenomenon. When the first Filipino and Chinese immigrants arrived in the United States during the 1700s and 1800s, they were almost exclusively men. Because there were very few Asian women in the U.S. at that time, some of these men formed relationships or married women of other racial backgrounds. As anti-Asian sentiment grew, however, these relationships were increasingly viewed by white Americans as a threat to racial purity and the social order. In response, many states passed anti-miscegenation laws—laws that prohibited marriage between whites and non-Whites, including Asians. These laws reinforced racial hierarchies by criminalizing interracial unions and restricting the rights of Asian immigrants and their descendants to form families.

After World War II, however, the gender dynamics of this interracial process flip-flopped. U.S. servicemen who fought and were stationed overseas in Asian countries began coming home with Asian "war brides." Data show that from 1945 into the 1970s, thousands of young women from China, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and later Vietnam came to the U.S. as war brides each year. Further, after the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act, many couples helped to expand the Asian American community by sponsoring their family and other relatives to immigrate to the U.S. (Koshy, 2005). Today, interracial relationships are an established part of Asian American family life, although rates vary considerably by gender, generation, national origin, and social class.

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4.9: African American Families

Exploring African American Families

The terms Black and African American are both used in this section. Black is often preferred as a broader term because it includes African Americans as well as people from the wider African diaspora living in the United States.

Although race is a social construct, it has had profound and lasting effects on African American families. The legacy of slavery shaped not only individual lives but also the structure of family life across generations. Families were repeatedly torn apart through sale and forced separation, yet they also created strong kinship and community networks under conditions of extraordinary hardship. Understanding this history is essential to seeing how race, power, and inequality continue to shape African American families today.

The 1619 Project

The 1619 Project, created by journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones and published by The New York Times Magazine in 2019, is a valuable resource for understanding slavery and its enduring legacy in the United States (Penguin Random House, n.d.). Marking 400 years since the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in the English colonies in 1619, the project reframes U.S. history by placing slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the center of the national story. In doing so, it highlights how slavery and systemic racism have shaped nearly every aspect of American life, including politics, the economy, culture, and family.

According to historian Milton Meltzer, the rise of the transatlantic slave trade created a powerful incentive to classify human beings into racial categories in order to justify the enslavement and subordination of Africans. As Europeans began sorting themselves and others into groups based on physical appearance, they attributed to these groups supposedly fixed physical, intellectual, behavioral, and moral traits. Over time, these beliefs became embedded in popular understandings of race.

During slavery in the U.S. South, the skin tones of enslaved people often became more varied as children were born through sexual exploitation and rape by slaveholders and other white men. As these distinctions became more difficult to police visually, disputes over racial classification increased. In some cases, individuals accused of having Black ancestry went to court to try to prove they were white in order to avoid enslavement or the legal and social penalties associated with Blackness (Staples, 1998).

Debates over how the history of slavery and racial inequality should be represented continue in the present. As Nikole Hannah-Jones and others have observed, recent changes to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives have included efforts to remove or revise federal content documenting the histories and contributions of people of color. For example, the National Park Service briefly removed material about Harriet Tubman from an Underground Railroad webpage in 2025 and, in January 2026, removed portions of The President's House: Freedom and Slavery in the Making of a New Nation exhibit at Philadelphia's Independence National Historical Park (Barbaro et al., 2025).

Anti-miscegenation Laws

Anti-miscegenation laws, which banned interracial marriage, were once widespread in the United States. First enacted in the 1600s, these laws were designed in part to prevent free Black people from marrying whites and to deny inheritance rights to the mixed-race children of white slaveholders and enslaved African women. It was not until 1967, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, that the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in Loving v. Virginia that such laws were unconstitutional. At the time, 38 states still had laws prohibiting marriage between whites and nonwhites. In this sense, interracial marriage has become more common only relatively recently in U.S. history (Pascoe, 2010).

The legacy of anti-miscegenation laws continues to shape contemporary society and reflects an ongoing discomfort with crossing racial boundaries. Although interracial marriage is now legal, multiracial families often remain subject to scrutiny in ways that reveal how deeply racial categories are embedded in social life. In her article, Navigating the Hypervisibility and Invisibility of Mixed-Race Families, Johnson (2024) explains that multiracial families frequently experience both racial surveillance and erasure. On the one hand, families may attract unwanted attention, intrusive questions, or assumptions about whether family members "belong" together. On the other hand, their family relationships and multiracial identities may be misunderstood or erased when people rely on rigid assumptions about what members of the same family or racial group are supposed to look like (Johnson,

2024). These experiences echo the legacy of anti-miscegenation laws, which for centuries criminalized interracial relationships and sought to police racial boundaries. In this way, the policing of interracial families has shifted from formal law to more subtle forms of social surveillance.

Racism, Health, and Reproductive Inequality

Journalist and health scholar Linda Villarosa (2022) argues that racism has a harmful impact on African Americans' physical health. Her work shows that health disparities are not simply the result of individual behavior or biology, but are shaped by structural racism, unequal medical treatment, environmental inequality, and the chronic stress of racial discrimination (Villarosa, 2022). Reproductive health provides an important example of how these broader inequalities have affected Black women and families.

African American women have faced a long history of reproductive control within the U.S. medical system. During the twentieth century, eugenic policies and discriminatory medical practices subjected many marginalized and low-income women, including Black women, to sterilization without their full knowledge or consent. These practices reflected racist and class-based beliefs about who should be encouraged—or prevented—from having children and demonstrate how reproductive inequality can shape family formation. As Dorothy Roberts documents, efforts to control Black women's reproduction have historically been intertwined with racial, gender, and class inequality (Roberts, 1997). This history of coerced sterilization has also contributed to mistrust of medical institutions and illustrates how racism has affected not only economic opportunity and family life, but also the fundamental right to make decisions about reproduction and family formation.

Family Structure and Resilience in African American Communities

The structure of African American families has deep and complex historical roots. A study of family life in Philadelphia in 1880 found that about three-quarters of Black families were nuclear families made up of two parents and their children. U.S. Census data similarly indicate that from 1880 to 1960, married two-parent households remained the most common family form among African Americans, even though their share gradually declined over time. Single-parent households remained relatively stable until around 1960, after which they increased more sharply.

The changing structure of African American families became a major topic of national debate in 1965 with the publication of the Moynihan Report, written by sociologist and later U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. The report argued that the declining share of married two-parent households in Black communities could limit socioeconomic progress. It sparked decades of debate about race, poverty, family structure, and public policy.

At the time, non-marital birth rates were increasing. National data show that the share of nonmarital births among Black mothers increased in the late twentieth century. In 1990, about 66.7% of births to non-Hispanic Black mothers were nonmarital; by 2000, the figure had increased to 68.7%; and by 2013, it had reached 71.4% (Congressional Research Service, 2014). Marriage rates also declined among African American communities. According to Pew Research Center (2016), family living arrangements differ by race. Among adults ages 25 and older, 35% of Black adults were married, compared with 60% of white adults. Among children, 54% of Black children lived with a single parent, compared with 19% of white children (Pew Research Center, 2016). Rather than treating these differences as simply matters of personal choice, sociologists examine how they are shaped by structural factors, including racism, labor market inequality, incarceration, residential segregation, and unequal access to wealth.

This pattern was historically labeled "Black matriarchy," a term now criticized for oversimplifying African American family life and reinforcing gendered and racial stereotypes. In addition, within African American communities, the long-standing tradition of othermothers—women who care for children who are not their biological offspring—reflects a broader understanding of family as a kin- and community-based caregiving network rather than a strictly nuclear unit. Othermothers may include grandmothers, aunts, neighbors, church members, and close family friends who provide childcare, emotional support, guidance, and protection. Patricia Hill Collins describes this as part of a "community-based ethic of care," in which shared responsibility and mutual aid help families navigate structural inequalities such as racism, poverty, and limited access to resources (Collins, 2000).

Declining Marriage Rates and Rise in Divorce

Among African Americans who do marry, divorce rates are generally higher than among white Americans, and marriages tend to occur later and last for shorter periods on average. As a result, African Americans are more likely to marry at older ages, spend fewer years married, and experience divorce. These patterns matter sociologically because single-parent households are more likely to experience poverty, in part because they typically rely on one adult income rather than two.

At the same time, these statistics must be interpreted carefully. Divorce patterns vary depending on whether researchers examine first divorces, overall divorce rates, or divorce among currently or ever-married adults. Differences in marriage timing, marriage prevalence, and remarriage across racial and ethnic groups also complicate direct comparisons. These issues will be explored further in the chapter on Divorce and Remarriage.

Sociologist William Julius Wilson (1987) argued that changes in the U.S. economy reduced the number of stable, well-paying jobs available to many Black men in urban communities. As unemployment and economic insecurity increased, the pool of "marriageable" men—men seen as economically able to support or contribute to a household—declined (Wilson, 1987). Wilson used the term "marriageable men" to refer to men seen within prevailing gender norms as economically able to contribute to a household. This created a "marriage squeeze," in which Black women faced a smaller pool of potential male partners with stable employment. Wilson's argument connects marriage patterns not simply to individual choice, but to structural factors such as racial discrimination, concentrated poverty, and labor market inequality.

More recent research by Pepin and Cohen (2018) indicates racial disparities in marriage. In their study of roughly 300,000 Black and white women ages 20 to 45, Black women were about half as likely as white women to have married for the first time in the previous year, and white women tended to marry at younger ages. Education and the local availability of unmarried men both increased the likelihood of marriage (Pepin & Cohen, 2018). These findings suggest that racial differences in marriage rates are closely tied to unequal marriage markets and broader structural inequality, rather than simply to cultural differences in attitudes toward marriage.

Incarceration and Family Life

The connection between family life and the criminal justice system is especially visible in the disproportionate incarceration of Black men. Disproportionate incarceration, along with higher rates of premature mortality, helps explain the "marriage squeeze" discussed earlier because these patterns can disrupt opportunities for partnership, parenting, and family formation. Although Black Americans make up about 13 to 14% of the U.S. population, they accounted for about 32% of sentenced state and federal prisoners at year end 2022 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2023). The documentary 13th connects contemporary mass incarceration to a longer history of racial control, from slavery and Jim Crow to the war on drugs and modern criminal justice policy (DuVernay, 2016).

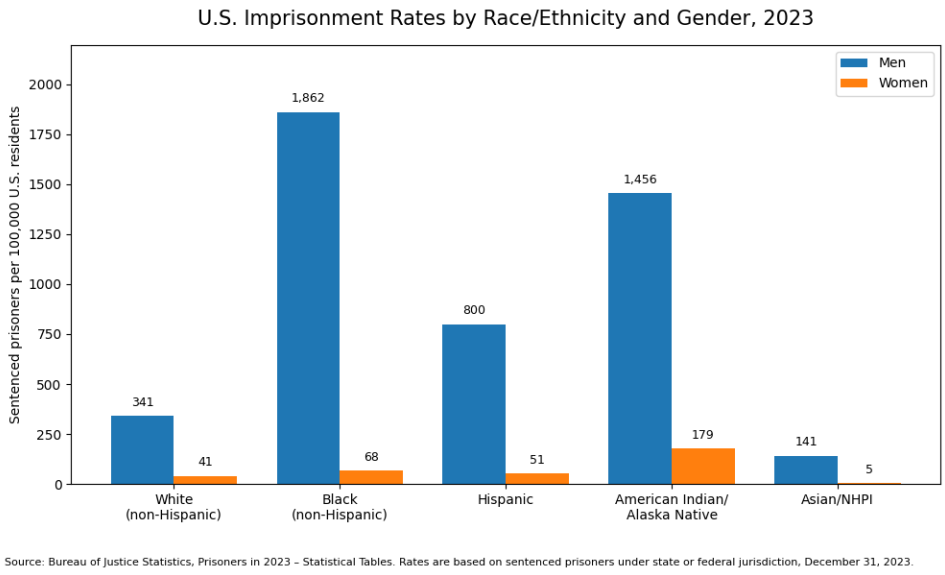


Figure 4.9.1: Prisoners in 2023: Statistical tables. (Public domain; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2024 via U.S. Department of Justice)

The effects of incarceration extend well beyond the person who is imprisoned. They shape the lives of partners, children, extended kin, and entire communities. Incarceration can alter life chances long after release. Pager (2004) found that a criminal record significantly reduces employment opportunities, with especially severe effects for African American job applicants (Pager, 2004). It can also disrupt family roles and relationships, making it more difficult for formerly incarcerated men to maintain or rebuild their identities as fathers, partners, and providers. After release, efforts to reestablish trust, resume caregiving responsibilities, and reconnect with family members may be hindered by structural barriers such as employment discrimination, housing instability,

legal restrictions, and ongoing stigma, as well as by the emotional strain of separation. In this way, incarceration can weaken family ties and create lasting challenges for stability, belonging, and identity.

Racial Wealth Inequality

Sociologist Melvin L. Oliver is well known for his research on racial wealth inequality, co-authored with Thomas M. Shapiro. Oliver and Shapiro (2006) argue that racial inequality in the United States cannot be understood by income alone because wealth provides families with long-term security and opportunity. It can help families buy homes, pay for education, weather financial emergencies, live in well-resourced neighborhoods, and pass advantages onto the next generation. However, discriminatory housing policies, unequal access to credit, labor market discrimination, and residential segregation have limited Black families' ability to accumulate and transfer wealth (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). These structural barriers continue to shape homeownership, educational access, neighborhood stability, and other foundations of family well-being.

Video: The House We Live In

Duration: 6 minutes and 4 seconds.

Episode 3 of Race: The Power of an Illusion, "The House We Live In," examines how redlining, housing discrimination, and unequal access to homeownership helped create racial wealth gaps and residential segregation (Adelman, 2003).

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Recent data underscore the persistence of this gap. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, households with a non-Hispanic White householder had about ten times the wealth of households with a Black householder in 2021. Median wealth was $250,400 for households with a white householder, compared with $24,520 for households with a Black householder (Sullivan et al., 2024). These figures show that racial inequality in the United States is rooted not only in income differences, but also in the unequal accumulation and transfer of wealth across generations.

Pattillo's (2013) research on the Black middle class further shows that class mobility does not fully shield African American families from racial inequality. Black middle-class families may have economic advantages while still being affected by residential segregation, neighborhood inequality, under-resourced schools, crime, policing, and limited access to the forms of security and inherited wealth often associated with white middle-class status (Pattillo, 2013).

At the same time, Oliver's work also points to the resilience of African American communities. Extended kin networks, community organizations, and shared cultural practices have often helped families navigate and resist structural disadvantage. In this way, Oliver shifted the focus away from explanations based only on the individual and toward the historical and institutional forces that continue to shape Black family life in the United States.

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4.10: Immigration and Family Life

Exploring Immigration and Family Life

Immigration refers to moving to another country to live there, while migration is a broader term that includes movement within or across national borders. Migration to the United States has been shaped by a wide range of circumstances, including economic opportunity, family reunification, political or religious persecution, war, displacement, and environmental crises.

Immigration has been a major source of population growth and cultural change in the United States. Different historical periods brought different national, racial, and ethnic groups to the country. During the seventeenth century, for example, about 175,000 English migrants came to Colonial America. Over half of all European immigrants to Colonial America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries arrived as indentured servants. The mid-nineteenth century brought large numbers of immigrants from northern Europe, the early twentieth century saw more immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, and after 1965 immigration increasingly came from Latin America and Asia.

Video: Here is Everyone Who Has Emigrated to the United States Since 1820

Duration: 1 minute and 41 seconds.

Immigration to the United States, 1820–2013. This animated map shows where lawful permanent residents came from before immigrating to the United States. Each dot represents 10,000 people, and brighter countries indicate higher levels of migration over time (Metrocosm, 2016).

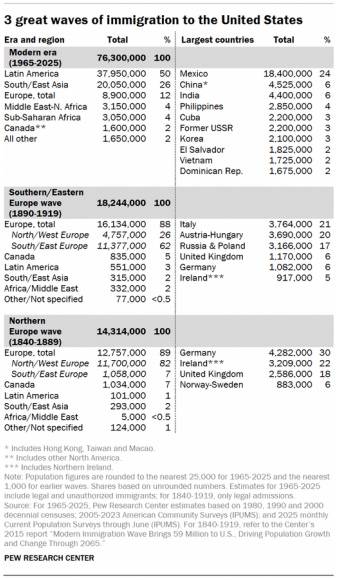
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Contemporary Immigration

Until the 1930s, most legal immigrants to the United States were men. By the 1990s, women made up just over half of all legal immigrants. Contemporary immigrants also tend to be younger than the native-born U.S. population, with people between the ages of 15 and 34 overrepresented. They are more likely to be married and less likely to be divorced than native-born Americans of the same age.

U.S. immigration has changed significantly across historical periods. Earlier immigration waves came mostly from Europe, especially Germany, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Italy, Austria-Hungary, Russia, and Poland. Since 1965, immigration has been more diverse, with large numbers of immigrants from Latin America and South/East Asia, especially Mexico, China, India, the Philippines, Cuba, Korea, El Salvador, Vietnam, and the Dominican Republic (Pew Research Center, 2025).



3 great waves of immigration to the United States

Era and region	Total	%	Largest countries	Total	%
Modern era (1965-2025)	**76,300,000**	**100**			
Latin America	37,950,000	50	Mexico	18,400,000	24
South/East Asia	20,050,000	26	China*	4,525,000	6
Europe, total	8,900,000	12	India	4,400,000	6
Middle East-N. Africa	3,150,000	4	Philippines	2,850,000	4
Sub-Saharan Africa	3,050,000	4	Cuba	2,200,000	3
Canada**	1,600,000	2	Former USSR	2,200,000	3
All other	1,650,000	2	Korea	2,100,000	3
			El Salvador	1,825,000	2
			Vietnam	1,725,000	2
			Dominican Rep.	1,675,000	2
Southern/Eastern Europe wave (1890-1919)	**18,244,000**	**100**			
Europe, total	16,134,000	88	Italy	3,764,000	21
North/West Europe	4,757,000	26	Austria-Hungary	3,690,000	20
South/East Europe	11,377,000	62	Russia & Poland	3,166,000	17
Canada	835,000	5	United Kingdom	1,170,000	6
Latin America	551,000	3	Germany	1,082,000	6
South/East Asia	315,000	2	Ireland***	917,000	5
Africa/Middle East	332,000	2			
Other/Not specified	77,000	<0.5			
Northern Europe wave (1840-1889)	**14,314,000**	**100**			
Europe, total	12,757,000	89	Germany	4,282,000	30
North/West Europe	11,700,000	82	Ireland***	3,209,000	22
South/East Europe	1,058,000	7	United Kingdom	2,586,000	18
Canada	1,034,000	7	Norway-Sweden	883,000	6
Latin America	101,000	1			
South/East Asia	293,000	2			
Africa/Middle East	5,000	<0.5			
Other/Not specified	124,000	1			

* Includes Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macao.
** Includes other North America.
*** Includes Northern Ireland.
Note: Population figures are rounded to the nearest 25,000 for 1965-2025 and the nearest 1,000 for earlier waves. Shares based on unrounded numbers. Estimates for 1965-2025 include legal and unauthorized immigrants; for 1840-1919, only legal admissions.
Source: For 1965-2025, Pew Research Center estimates based on 1980, 1990 and 2000 decennial censuses; 2005-2023 American Community Surveys (IPUMS); and 2025 monthly Current Population Surveys through June (IPUMS). For 1840-1919, refer to the Center's 2015 report "Modern Immigration Wave Brings 59 Million to U.S., Driving Population Growth and Change Through 2065."

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Figure 4.10.1: Key findings about U.S. immigrants. (Copyright; Pew Research Center)

The chart above shows the three major waves of immigration to the United States. Pew Research Center identifies three broad periods of immigration: the Northern Europe wave from 1840 to 1889, the Southern and Eastern Europe wave from 1890 to 1919, and the modern era from 1965 to 2025 (Pew Research Center, 2025).

Immigrants have also historically tended to settle in places where others from similar backgrounds already live. This pattern, seen throughout U.S. history, can provide social support, cultural familiarity, and economic networks, while also shaping the formation of ethnic communities.

Strangers in a Familiar Land

Duration: 3 minutes and 36 seconds.

Sociologist Cameron Lippard examines the experiences of Mexican migrant workers who harvest Christmas trees in rural America through temporary work visas. His research shows that relationships between growers and migrant workers are shaped by both economic dependence and inequality. Although some workers may find rural life more familiar or welcoming than cities, they still face racial and social discrimination that affects their sense of belonging (American Sociological Association, 2019).

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Immigrants in the United States have different legal statuses. Some are lawful permanent residents, naturalized citizens, refugees, asylees, or visa holders, while others are unauthorized, meaning they live in the country without current legal permission. Members of the same family may also have different legal statuses, creating what sociologists describe as mixed-status families.

Immigration, Public Opinion, and Family Life

Immigration remains a significant issue in U.S. public life. Political leaders, media commentators, and members of the public debate immigration in relation to border security, economic effects, national identity, citizenship, and immigrants' rights. Public

opinion varies, with some Americans favoring stricter federal enforcement and others emphasizing immigrants' contributions, rights, and dignity.

Recent research suggests that immigration enforcement can also affect everyday family and community life. In a 2025 Pew Research Center survey, 19% of U.S. adults said they worried that they, a family member, or a close friend could be deported, with concern particularly high among Latino adults and immigrants (Pew Research Center, 2025). Such concerns may affect family stability, employment, and willingness to interact with public institutions.

These effects may be especially significant in mixed-status families, in which family members have different citizenship or immigration statuses. Detention or deportation can result in family separation, loss of income, caregiving disruptions, and prolonged uncertainty. Zarrugh and Romero (2019) show that affected families and advocacy groups may respond through vigils, protests, and public storytelling that draw attention to the human consequences of immigration enforcement (Zarrugh & Romero, 2019).

Immigration is also an enduring part of U.S. society. Immigrants contribute to the labor force, participate in communities, and shape the nation's cultural and demographic development. For sociologists, immigration is therefore not only a policy issue but also a social process that affects family formation, community belonging, and ideas about citizenship.

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Figure Attributions

Figure 4.10.1. Pew Research Center. (2025, August 21). Key findings about U.S. immigrants.

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4.11: Conclusion

Concluding Remarks

Race and ethnicity are socially constructed categories, but they have powerful and lasting consequences for family life. Historical and contemporary forces—including colonization, slavery, segregation, immigration policy, discrimination, and unequal access to wealth, education, healthcare, and legal protection—continue to shape family opportunities and experiences in the United States. At the same time, families across racial and ethnic groups draw on cultural traditions, kinship networks, community ties, and shared identities as sources of continuity, support, and resilience.

This chapter has also emphasized the importance of avoiding broad assumptions about racial and ethnic groups. Family experiences vary considerably within groups according to factors such as social class, gender, national origin, immigration history, generation, and region. Understanding race and ethnicity therefore requires attention both to cultural diversity and to the larger social structures that shape family life.

In the next chapter, we turn to social class and examine how economic inequality, access to resources, and class position further influence family experiences and opportunities.

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5: SOCIAL CLASS

5.1: Learning Objectives

5.2: Introduction

5.3: Social Stratification and Family Life

5.4: Social Class and Family Inequality

5.5: Social Mobility

5.6: Standard of Living, Poverty, and Basic Needs

5.7: Social Class and Family Formation

5.8: Theoretical Perspectives on Social Stratification

5.9: Social Class, Parenting, and the Reproduction of Inequality

5.10: Conclusion

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5.1: Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Define social stratification and explain how it creates unequal access to resources and opportunities
- Identify the major social class categories in the United States
- Describe social mobility and identify its major forms
- Explain the concept of standard of living and how it varies across families
- Compare how Structural Functionalist, Conflict Theory, and Symbolic Interactionist perspectives explain social stratification
- Examine how social class shapes patterns of marriage, divorce, childbearing, and household composition
- Identify the major forms of capital and explain how each can shape social inequality

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5.2: Introduction

This chapter explores how social class shapes family life in the United States. It explains key concepts such as social stratification, social mobility, meritocracy, and standard of living, while showing that inequality is shaped by larger social structures. Although many Americans believe that hard work alone determines success, opportunities and outcomes are often produced and reproduced through institutions such as the education system, labor market, housing market, tax system, health care system, family wealth, and social networks.

Because families are a key setting in which resources, expectations, opportunities, and disadvantages are passed from one generation to the next, social class is central to understanding family life from a sociological perspective. The chapter also examines theoretical perspectives on social stratification, as well as how social class influences marriage, divorce, fertility, poverty, and family well-being.

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5.3: Social Stratification and Family Life

Exploring Social Stratification and Family Life

Geologists use the term stratification to describe the distinct vertical layers found in rock (figure 5.3.1). In sociology, social stratification refers to the layered structure of society created by the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities. People with greater access to wealth, power, and prestige occupy higher positions in this social hierarchy, while those with fewer resources occupy lower positions. An individual's location within this system is often described as their socioeconomic status (SES). Strata in rock can illustrate social stratification whereby people are sorted, or layered, into levels of socioeconomic status (SES).



Figure 5.3.1: Candy Cliffs rock strata. (Copyright; photo by Elizabeth B. Pearce via Candy Cliffs Rock Strata) Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

Most people and institutions in the United States support the ideal of meritocracy—the belief that social position should be based on individual effort, talent, and achievement. In this view, everyone is assumed to have an equal opportunity to succeed. Sociologists, however, argue that opportunities are also shaped by factors such as inherited wealth, discrimination, institutional racism, and unequal access to resources.

Social class inequality is visible in many areas of everyday life, including housing, education, health care, work, and family life. While people experience inequality personally, sociologists examine the broader social patterns that shape those experiences. People with similar backgrounds, identities, and social locations often occupy similar positions within systems of stratification. This means that inequality is not simply a matter of individual choices; it is also built into social institutions and reproduced across generations.

Victor Rios's research challenges the idea of meritocracy (Rios, 2011). In his book Punished, Rios (2011) shows that many Black and Latino boys face surveillance, punishment, and stigma in schools and communities before they have an equal chance to succeed. His work reminds us that social outcomes are shaped not only by effort and talent, but also by racism, unequal treatment, and broader systems of inequality.

One key factor shaping social standing is family background. Parents often pass their social position onto their children, along with the cultural norms, values, expectations, and habits associated with a particular way of life. Families also provide access to networks of relatives, friends, and community members who can offer resources, information, and support. This helps explain why first-generation college students may face additional challenges compared with students whose parents attended college. Without the same inherited familiarity with higher education or access to college-related support networks, first-generation students often face greater challenges navigating admissions, financial aid, academic expectations, and other aspects of the

college experience.

Other determinants of social standing are rooted in a society's occupational structure. For example, teachers often have high levels of education but earn less than many other highly educated professionals. One reason is that teaching is often framed as a noble or selfless calling, with the expectation that teachers should work for the love of the profession and the well-being of their students rather than financial reward. This expectation is rarely applied in the same way to professional athletes, corporate executives, or others in high-paying occupations. Cultural attitudes and beliefs like these help justify and reproduce social and economic inequality.

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Rios, V. M. (2011). Punished: Policing the lives of Black and Latino boys. New York University Press.

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5.4: Social Class and Family Inequality

Exploring Social Class and Family Inequality

Categorizing social class is not an exact science. Sociologists generally identify three broad class levels in the United States: upper, middle, and lower class, with many subcategories within each. Social class is closely related to socioeconomic status (SES). Socioeconomic status is a measure of a person's or family's social and economic position based on factors such as income, education, occupation, and wealth. Wealth is especially important because it can be passed from one generation to the next, helping to reproduce class advantages and perpetuate the class structure over time.

From a sociological perspective, social classes can be distinguished in part by the degree of power and control people have over their own lives and the lives of others. Members of the upper class generally have substantial control over their own circumstances and their social position often gives them influence over broader economic, political, and institutional decisions that affect others. The middle class typically has a greater degree of autonomy and security in daily life but usually does not exercise the same level of power over other groups. In contrast, members of the lower class often have much less control over their working conditions, economic circumstances, and life chances. With this in mind, we can examine the major divisions of social class in the United States and their key subcategories.

The Upper Class

The upper class occupies the highest level of the class system and consists of a small but powerful elite. In the United States, people with extreme wealth make up roughly 1% of the population yet control a disproportionate share of the nation's wealth. Their influence extends well beyond their own households. As corporate leaders, they make decisions that affect the employment and livelihoods of millions. As owners of major media outlets, they shape public narratives and cultural meanings. Through positions on the boards of influential colleges, universities, and foundations, they help define institutional priorities and social values. As major political donors, they also exert considerable influence over campaigns and public policy, at times in ways that reinforce their own privilege and power.

The Middle Class

Many people in the United States identify as middle class, but the meaning of that label is often unclear and contested. People with very different incomes, occupations, levels of education, and amounts of wealth may all describe themselves as middle class. This broad self-identification helps explain why sociologists often divide the middle class into more specific categories, such as the lower-middle class and upper-middle class.

Members of the lower-middle class often have some college education, an associate degree, or a bachelor's degree. They commonly work in technical, administrative support, sales, or lower-level management positions. Although they may be able to maintain a stable and conventional standard of living, they often have limited financial security and may struggle to build substantial savings or wealth.

Members of the upper middle-class are more likely to hold bachelor's degrees and postgraduate credentials in fields such as business, law, medicine, or management. They often work in professional or managerial occupations that provide higher incomes, greater job stability, and more autonomy. This class position often allows them to own homes, travel, and invest more heavily in their children's education and health care (Gilbert, 2010).

At the same time, most middle class families—whether lower or upper middle class—still depend on continued employment to maintain their lifestyle, even if they possess some accumulated wealth.

The Working Class, Working Poor, and Extreme Poverty

People with lower incomes are often grouped within the working class, though sociologists distinguish important differences within this part of the class structure. Like the middle and upper classes, the lower class includes several subcategories, including

the working class, the working poor, and the underclass. In general, people in these groups tend to have lower levels of formal education and lower incomes than those in the middle and upper classes. They are also more likely to work in jobs that require less training or experience and involve routine tasks performed under close supervision.

The working class, the highest subcategory within the lower class, often holds relatively steady jobs that are manual, hands-on, and sometimes physically demanding. These occupations include work such as construction, landscaping, cooking, cleaning, and repair. Although such jobs can provide regular employment, they often offer limited opportunities for advancement and less economic security than many middle-class occupations.

The working poor are people who work for wages but still do not earn enough to meet basic needs. They face significant economic insecurity and are typically employed in low-wage jobs that require little formal training and often provide few, if any, benefits, such as health insurance, paid leave, or retirement plans. Their work may also be temporary, part-time, seasonal, or unpredictable. Occupations in this category often include day labor, domestic work, farm labor, food service, and other forms of precarious employment.

One of the most striking features of class inequality is that people can work full-time and still remain in poverty. Even with steady employment, many working-poor adults earn too little to support themselves or their families. Although minimum wage laws establish a wage floor, that floor is often not high enough to lift workers above the poverty line, especially in places with high housing, food, and child-care costs.

At the bottom of the class structure is the group sometimes referred to as the underclass. This term is controversial and many sociologists criticize it for being overly broad, stigmatizing, or misleading (Gans, 1990). It has been used, however, to describe people facing severe and persistent poverty, unstable housing, chronic unemployment or underemployment, and heavy reliance on public assistance. Some people in this group experience housing insecurity, including homelessness, while others struggle to meet basic needs even with government support.

Income and Wealth Disparities Across Social Class

It is important to distinguish between income and wealth when analyzing economic inequality. Income refers to money received from wages, salaries, benefits, investments, or other sources, while wealth, or net worth, refers to the total value of a household's assets minus its debts. This distinction matters because two households may have similar incomes but very different levels of wealth. For example, one household may own a home, have retirement savings, and receive family support, while another may earn a similar income but carry student loans, credit card debt, or housing insecurity.

Income

Pew Research Center defines income groups in relation to the national median household income. National median household income refers to the midpoint of all household incomes in the United States, meaning that half of households earn less than this amount and half earn more. Pew defines lower-income households as those earning less than two-thirds of the median, middle-income households as those earning between two-thirds and twice the median, and upper-income households as those earning more than twice the median. These measures are adjusted for household size; in some Pew analyses, they are also adjusted for regional cost-of-living differences. This shows that income categories are shaped not only by the amount of money a household earns, but also by household size and location (Kochhar, 2024).

Pew Research Center shows that income varies sharply across lower-, middle-, and upper-income households (see Figure 5.4.1). In 2022, the median income for lower-income households was about $35,300, compared with $106,100 for middle-income households and $256,900 for upper-income households (Kochhar, 2024). Pew's data also show that the upper-income tier experienced the largest growth in median income over time, widening the gap between upper-income households and those in the middle and lower tiers. These income differences also vary by race. In 2022, the share of people in the U.S. middle class ranged from 46% to 55% across racial groups. Black and Hispanic Americans, Native Hawaiians or Pacific Islanders, and American Indian or Alaska Natives were more likely than other groups to live in lower-income households (Kochhar, 2024).

(A note on terminology: The language used to describe racial and ethnic groups can vary across sources and over time. On this page, the terms used by the original data source are used.)

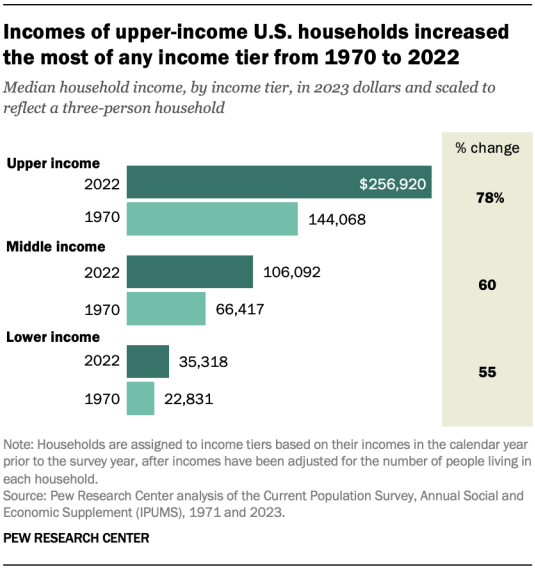


Figure 5.4.1: Median household income by income tier in the United States, 1970 and 2022. (Copyright; Pew Research Center via Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement)

Wealth

There is a large gap in wealth between lower- and upper-income households in the United States, and these differences are also shaped by race and ethnicity. In 2021, the typical upper-income household had a median net worth of $803,400, which was 33 times higher than the median net worth of a lower-income household, at $24,500. Middle-income households had a median net worth of $204,100, about one-fourth the wealth of upper-income households (Kochhar & Moslimani, 2023).

Among lower-income households, racial wealth gaps were especially stark. In 2021, the typical lower-income White household had a net worth of $55,400, while the typical lower-income Asian household had a net worth of $40,800. By contrast, lower-income Hispanic households had a median net worth of $12,100, and lower-income Black households had $2,700. These figures show that class inequality is reflected not only in income, but also in accumulated wealth, assets, debt, and long-term economic security. They also show how social class intersects with race and ethnicity, as broader systems of inequality shape who is able to build and pass on wealth over time (Kochhar & Moslimani, 2023). These wealth gaps matter for family life because wealth can help families buy homes, pay for college, manage emergencies, support adult children, and transfer advantages across generations.

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5.5: Social Mobility

Exploring Social Mobility

Stories of people overcoming severe disadvantage are often celebrated in U.S. culture. Alice Coachman, for example, grew up with limited resources and was denied access to training facilities because of racial discrimination. She practiced barefoot and built her own high jump equipment before becoming the first Black woman to win an Olympic gold medal. Her story is inspiring, but sociologically it also reminds us that individual achievement often occurs within unequal social conditions. Compared with the population as a whole, only a small number of people rise from poverty to exceptional success, and even fewer become wealthy. Structural barriers such as unequal schooling, discrimination, neighborhood disadvantage, and limited access to opportunity often constrain social mobility.

Social mobility refers to the movement of individuals or families within a system of social stratification. It occurs when changes in income, wealth, education, occupation, or other factors alter a person's or family's social class position.

Sociologists distinguish among several forms of social mobility. **Vertical mobility** refers to movement up or down the social hierarchy. **Upward mobility** occurs when individuals or families move to a higher social class, while downward mobility occurs when they move to a lower class position, sometimes as a result of unemployment, illness, divorce, debt, or other economic hardships. **Horizontal mobility** refers to a change in social position that does not substantially alter a person's social class, such as moving from one occupation to another with similar income and status.

Another important distinction is between **intergenerational mobility** and **intragenerational mobility**. **Intergenerational mobility** refers to differences in social class between generations of the same family, such as when children attain a higher or lower class position than their parents. **Intragenerational mobility** refers to changes in an individual's social class position over the course of their own lifetime.

Sociologists also distinguish **structural mobility**, which occurs when broad social and economic changes alter the class positions of large groups of people. During the first half of the twentieth century, industrialization and economic expansion contributed to rising living standards and upward mobility for many Americans. In contrast, more recent changes—including recessions, deindustrialization, automation, and the outsourcing of jobs—have contributed to economic insecurity and downward mobility for some workers and communities. Structural mobility therefore reminds us that changes in social class are shaped not only by individual choices and effort, but also by wider economic and social forces.

Social mobility can also occur through family formation and marriage, particularly in exogamous marriages, in which partners come from different social class backgrounds. By contrast, endogamous marriages involve partners from similar social backgrounds and may help reproduce existing class positions across generations.

Sociologist Jessie Streib's research on people who marry across class lines shows that marriage can bring individuals into close contact with different class cultures, lifestyles, and resources (Streib, 2015). However, class differences do not simply disappear when people marry. Differences in spending habits, communication styles, family expectations, and attitudes toward work and success can remain important sources of tension within relationships. Streib's work highlights that social mobility is not only about changes in income or occupation, but also about navigating the cultural expectations and everyday practices associated with social class.

Social Mobility Today

The COVID-19 pandemic and the spread of artificial intelligence (AI) have added new dimensions to social mobility. The pandemic disrupted employment on a massive scale and intensified existing inequalities, with some workers able to shift to remote work while others—especially in low-wage service jobs—faced layoffs, health risks, and long-term economic instability. At the same time, AI and automation are reshaping the labor market by increasing demand for some high-skill jobs while placing greater pressure on routine and lower-wage work. As such, major technological and social transformations can expand opportunity for some groups while increasing insecurity for others.

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5.6: Standard of Living, Poverty, and Basic Needs

Exploring Standard of Living, Poverty, and Basic Needs

Standard of living refers to the level of material comfort, goods, and services available to individuals or families. It is commonly assessed through indicators such as income, wealth, employment, housing affordability, education, and health. Although the United States has long had a relatively high standard of living by global measures, access to that standard of living is unevenly distributed. As a result, sociologists emphasize that living standards are shaped not only by the amount of wealth in a society, but also by how that wealth and opportunity are distributed.

In the United States, a small portion of the population has access to the highest standard of living. According to Federal Reserve Distributional Financial Accounts data, wealth is highly concentrated at the top of the U.S. wealth distribution. In the fourth quarter of 2024:

- the top 10% of households by wealth held 67.2% of total household wealth
- the bottom 50% held just 2.5%
- the wealthiest 1% held roughly 31% of total household wealth, though the exact figure varies slightly by quarter (Kent, 2025).

Although the middle class remains a substantial share of the U.S. population, it is smaller than it was in the early 1970s. According to recent Pew research, the share of Americans living in middle-class households declined from 61% in 1971 to 51% in 2023 (Kochhar, 2024).

Poverty and Basic-Needs Insecurity

Additionally, tens of millions of people in the United States struggle to pay rent, buy food and gas, find stable work, and afford basic medical care. Poverty is commonly measured by the federal government using income thresholds known as the poverty line or poverty guidelines, which vary by household size. In 2025, for example, the federal poverty guideline for the 48 contiguous states and Washington, DC was $15,650 for one person, $21,150 for a two-person household, and $32,150 for a family of four (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2025). Contiguous states refers to the U.S. states that are connected to each other on the mainland.

Statistics on children and poverty in the United States remain troubling. Recent census data show that 14.3% of children under age 18 lived in poverty in 2024, according to the official poverty measure. The Census Bureau also reports substantial racial disparities: in 2024, Black and Hispanic children had much higher poverty rates than non-Hispanic White children (Shrider & Bijou, 2025). These patterns suggest that child poverty is shaped not only by household income, but also by broader inequalities tied to race, ethnicity, gender, and family structure.

People experiencing homelessness face some of the clearest consequences of social class inequality. Although housing instability is often explained in individual terms, sociologists emphasize its structural roots, including poverty, rising housing costs, low wages, and the shortage of affordable housing. Research shows that homelessness tends to increase when rent rises faster than incomes, and these patterns are shaped by broader inequalities in race and class. On a single night in January 2024, 259,473 people in families with children were experiencing homelessness in the United States, underscoring the effects of housing insecurity on family life (de Sousa et al., 2024).

As sociologist Kathryn Edin emphasizes in her interview, poverty in the United States is not limited to people who are unemployed; many working families are only one setback away from serious hardship. A job loss, illness, car repair, eviction, or childcare disruption can quickly push working people into economic crisis, especially when wages are low, savings are limited, and public support is insufficient. From this perspective, poverty reflects the insecurity built into an economy in which many people work hard yet still lack the resources needed to withstand even a single misfortune.

Video: One Misfortune Away

Duration: 5 minutes 13 seconds

In an interview with the American Sociological Association, sociologist Kathryn Edin asks what happened to the American dream—the idea that anyone who is willing to work should not be poor. Edin illustrates this question through the story of a hardworking woman whose job loss led to a rapid spiral into poverty. Her story highlights the economic vulnerability facing many people in the United States today (American Sociological Association, 2018).

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

View this YouTube Video online

The Feminization of Poverty

Poverty has a gendered dimension. Sociologists and feminist scholars use the term feminization of poverty to describe women's disproportionate risk of poverty, which is shaped by gender inequalities in wages, caregiving responsibilities, employment opportunities, and family structure.

In 2024, the official U.S. poverty rate was 11.6% for women, compared with 9.6% for men. Poverty rates were especially high among people living in female-householder families, at 23.5%, compared with 11.2% among those living in male-householder families (Shrider & Bijou, 2025). These differences show how gender inequality in employment, caregiving, and family resources can increase women's and children's economic vulnerability.

Period Poverty

One consequence of gendered economic inequality is period poverty, or inadequate access to menstrual products, sanitation facilities, education, and support. Menstrual products are essential for health, education, employment, and full participation in public life. Yet menstruation is often stigmatized or treated as a private responsibility rather than a social and public-health concern.

The cost of menstrual products can place a significant burden on low-income individuals and families, particularly when household budgets are already strained by food, housing, transportation, and healthcare costs (UNICEF, n.d.). Period poverty therefore illustrates how gender and social class intersect to shape access to basic necessities.

More Than a ZIP Code: Poverty, Place, and Life Chances

One of the most significant consequences of poverty is that it shapes people's life chances, a concept associated with Max Weber that refers to the opportunities individuals have to access valued resources such as education, employment, health, housing, and social mobility. Where a family lives often determines much more than their address. It can influence the quality of schools children attend, the kinds of jobs available nearby, access to public transportation, the safety of the neighborhood, and whether families can easily buy fresh and healthy food.

Place also shapes exposure to environmental risks. Low-income neighborhoods often have fewer trees, more pavement, and less investment in green space, making them significantly hotter during the summer and more vulnerable to the effects of climate change. In this way, poverty is not only about having less money; it is also about having fewer choices, fewer protections, and fewer pathways to stability.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

Because poverty and basic-needs insecurity are shaped by broader social and economic conditions, public assistance programs play an important role in helping families meet essential needs. As a wealthy nation, the United States funds a range of federal and state social welfare programs designed to help meet basic needs, including food, health care, and income support. One of the best known is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. SNAP began as part of New Deal-era responses to hunger and surplus food and later became a permanent federal program. Its importance remains substantial today. In the fiscal year of 2024, SNAP served an average of 41.7 million people per

month—roughly 1 in 8 Americans—making it the nation's largest nutrition assistance program (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2025).

Although food insecurity is often discussed in relation to children, it also affects a significant number of older adults in the United States (Heflin & Harrington Meyer, 2025). In 2023, 9.2% of households containing adults age 60 and older experienced food insecurity, representing about 7.4 million older individuals. SNAP can play an important role in reducing hardship by helping households purchase food and, in some cases, lowering health-related costs. Even so, many older adults who qualify for SNAP do not receive benefits. Compared with other eligible groups, participation among older adults remains much lower, suggesting that access is shaped by more than need alone.

As Heflin and Harrington Meyer (2025) explain, several structural barriers help explain why older adults are less likely to use SNAP. The application and recertification process can be difficult to navigate, benefit amounts may not stretch far enough to cover food needs, and practical obstacles—such as limited transportation or difficulty reaching stores that accept benefits—can make using SNAP more challenging (Heflin & Harrington Meyer, 2025). These patterns can be understood through life course theory, which highlights how disadvantages accumulate over time, leaving some people more economically vulnerable in later life, and through social ecological theory, which emphasizes how family well-being is shaped by larger environments such as neighborhoods, transportation systems, community resources, and state policies. Together, these perspectives show that food insecurity among older adults reflects not simply personal circumstance, but the combined effects of lifelong inequality and unequal access to supportive social environments.

Poverty and College Students

Basic-needs insecurity is not limited to families with young children or people outside the workforce. Students can also experience food and housing insecurity while enrolled in college, making it difficult to focus on coursework, attend classes consistently, or complete a degree. These conditions raise an important question: How can students be expected to graduate when they are trying to study while also worrying about where they will sleep or how they will eat? Many students are not able to persist under these circumstances. If students' hard work is to result in a degree, colleges and policymakers need to build stronger systems of support that address students' basic needs while enrolled.

Video: Studying While Hungry

Duration: 5 minutes 01 seconds

In an interview with the American Sociological Association, sociologist Sara Goldrick-Rab of Temple University highlights the serious challenges many college students face outside the classroom. She notes that approximately 50% of undergraduate students experience food insecurity during college, while about 10% experience homelessness (American Sociological Association, 2020).

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5.7: Social Class and Family Formation

Exploring Social Class and Family Formation

Social class strongly shapes family life, including patterns of marriage and divorce, household composition, and childbearing.

Marriage, Divorce, and Household Composition

Marriage is strongly patterned by social class in the United States. Using education as a measure of social class, recent data show that adults with higher levels of education are more likely to be married than those with less education (Loo, 2024). For example, in 2022, 58% of women with a bachelor's degree or higher were currently married, compared with 26% of women with less than a high school diploma. Census data also show that college-educated women are far more likely to be married at the time of first birth than women with less education.

In the United States, first marriages are more likely to end for couples with lower socioeconomic status than for those in the middle or upper class. Research suggests that these higher divorce rates are often linked to financial strain and economic insecurity. This is explored in detail in the chapter on "Divorce and Remarriage".

Social class both shapes and is shaped by household composition. Lower-income families are more likely to experience single-parent household structures, while single parenthood can also increase the risk of financial instability. In many cases, single-parent families must meet children's needs with fewer economic resources, less time, and reduced access to support. A single parent may face higher expenses, such as paid childcare, while also losing the income, labor, or caregiving support that a second parent might provide. As a result, single-parent households are more likely to experience economic strain, which can reinforce broader patterns of class inequality.

Fertility and Social Class

Across countries, fertility rates tend to be higher in lower-income nations and lower in wealthier ones, although fertility has declined globally over time. In 2024, the global fertility rate was about 2.2 births per woman, and the countries with the highest fertility levels were concentrated largely in lower-income regions, especially parts of sub-Saharan Africa (Molitoris & Kantorová, 2025).

Government policies can also shape fertility. China's one-child policy, introduced in 1979–1980 and phased out in 2016, restricted family size for many households, although enforcement varied across regions and social groups. Urban and more affluent families were often more tightly constrained, while many rural families had greater flexibility under the policy.

Within countries, class differences in fertility are more complex and vary by social context. In societies with relatively high fertility, more advantaged families may have more children than families with lower incomes because they have greater economic security and resources to support larger households. In low-fertility societies, upper- and middle-class families often have fewer children than average, reflecting higher levels of education, delayed parenthood, and career demands. These patterns show that fertility is shaped not only by individual preferences, but also by broader cultural norms, economic conditions, education, and social inequality.

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5.8: Theoretical Perspectives on Social Stratification

Exploring Theoretical Perspectives on Social Stratification

Social stratification takes on different meanings when examined through the lens of major sociological perspectives. These include Structural Functionalism, Conflict Theory, and Symbolic Interactionism.

Structural Functionalism

From a Structural Functionalist perspective, social stratification exists because it serves a purpose in society. Structural Functionalists argue that society is made up of interdependent parts and inequality helps ensure that the most important roles are filled by qualified people.

In 1945, sociologists Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore developed what became known as the Davis-Moore thesis. They argued that some jobs are more functionally important than others and therefore must offer greater rewards. According to this view, positions that require more training, skill, or responsibility—such as doctors, lawyers, or engineers—are rewarded with higher income, prestige, and power. These rewards motivate people to pursue difficult training and take on demanding roles.

For example, Davis and Moore would argue that a firefighter's job carries greater risks and requires more specialized preparation than the work of a grocery store cashier. Because of this, society offers firefighters greater rewards to encourage people to take on that role. More broadly, they believed that unequal rewards help match talented individuals with the positions society depends on most.

They also argued that jobs requiring rare skills or long periods of training will have fewer qualified applicants, which makes rewards even more important. Work that requires less training or specialized knowledge, by contrast, is more easily filled and therefore tends to receive lower pay and status.

This perspective has, however, been widely criticized. In 1953, sociologist Melvin Tumin argued that the Davis-Moore thesis overlooks barriers such as unequal access to education, discrimination, and inequalities based on race, social class, and gender. He suggested that social stratification does not simply reward talent but often prevents many capable people from reaching important positions in the first place.

This debate can be connected to family life because families do not all begin with the same resources. A child from a low-income family may have the talent to become a doctor but may face barriers such as underfunded schools, limited college preparation, the need to work while studying, or the high cost of medical training. In this way, social stratification affects families by shaping not only parents' economic security, but also children's future opportunities. Inequality can therefore be reproduced across generations, as advantages and disadvantages are passed down through family life.

Another criticism is that income and prestige do not always reflect how important a job is to society. Teachers, for example, perform work that is essential to educating future generations and typically require substantial training, yet they may earn considerably less than people in occupations with greater market rewards. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted this contradiction particularly clearly. Sociologist Eric Klinenberg notes that many workers designated as "essential"—including caregivers, grocery and retail workers, delivery workers, transit workers, and hospital support staff—performed work that society depended upon while often receiving relatively low wages and limited recognition (Grazian, 2026). This suggests that occupational rewards are shaped not only by a job's social importance or the training it requires, but also by broader labor-market conditions and inequalities.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theorists are highly critical of social stratification because they argue that it benefits some groups at the expense of others rather than serving society as a whole. From this perspective, inequality is not simply a reflection of differences in talent or effort; instead, it often helps preserve the power and privilege of those at the top. For example, Conflict theorists might point to the contrast between a professional athlete earning millions of dollars and a public school teacher earning a much smaller salary as evidence that economic rewards do not always reflect social value. In this view, stratification helps perpetuate inequality and helps explain why a wealthy society can still have large numbers of people living in poverty.

Many Conflict theorists build on the work of Karl Marx. Marx argued that social stratification was rooted in people's relationship to the means of production. He identified two main classes: the bourgeoisie, who owned factories, businesses, and land, and the proletariat, who sold their labor in order to survive. According to Marx, the bourgeoisie accumulated wealth and power through the labor of workers, while the proletariat received wages and had relatively little control over their work. Marx argued that this system could produce alienation, powerlessness, and class conflict.



Figure 5.8.1: Protest Against Custodial Job Outsourcing. Image by Brian Stansberry. (Copyright; Brian Stansberry via Wikimedia Commons, reproduced in OpenStax, Introduction to Sociology 3e) Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

These protesters opposed Tennessee Technological University's decision to lay off campus custodians and outsource their jobs to a private company in order to reduce employee benefit costs (see Figure 5.8.1). Outsourcing can reduce institutional expenses, but it may also lead to lower wages, fewer benefits, and less job security for workers. From a Conflict Theory perspective, this example raises questions about who benefits from cost-cutting decisions and who bears the costs.

Although working conditions have changed since Marx's time, Conflict theorists argue that many of these tensions remain. In capitalist societies, owners and those who control economic resources often have considerably more power than workers, while workers may receive only a portion of the wealth their labor helps generate. Families are also affected by these larger economic arrangements. A parent working full time in a low-wage job, for example, may still struggle to pay rent, afford childcare, buy groceries, or cover medical expenses, even while the company they work for generates substantial profits for owners or shareholders.

Conflict Theory has also been criticized for placing too much emphasis on inequality, power, and competition while giving less attention to cooperation, social stability, and shared interests. Traditional Marxist approaches have also been criticized for focusing primarily on economic class, although later Conflict theorists have examined how social class intersects with gender, race, ethnicity, and other forms of inequality.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic Interactionism examines social stratification at the micro level by focusing on everyday interactions and the meanings people attach to social class. From this perspective, social class is not only reflected in income, wealth, education, or occupation; it is also communicated through clothing, speech, housing, food, technology, leisure activities, and other aspects of everyday life.

People often live, work, attend school, and socialize with others who have similar class backgrounds, educational experiences, and lifestyles. These patterns shape friendships, social networks, romantic relationships, and ideas about who "belongs" in particular settings. Symbolic Interactionists are especially interested in how everyday objects and behaviors become symbols of status and how these symbols influence both self-identity and the ways people are judged by others.



Figure 5.8.2: Occupational Stratification and Social Status. Image reproduced in OpenStax, Introduction to Sociology 3e. (Copyright; Conerly et al. via OpenStax; image credits: Wikimedia Commons and Chun Kit/Flickr) Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

The images above show two different workplace settings: image (a) depicts construction workers at a job site, while image (b) shows business professionals in a meeting. These images invite us to consider how occupations are associated with different forms of status. How might construction workers, executives, and custodians differ in income, education, job security, working conditions, skill, and prestige? Which kinds of work are granted the most status in society, and why?

This perspective is particularly useful for understanding family life. Families often use consumer goods and experiences to communicate love, care, belonging, and social status. Sociologist Alison Pugh's research shows that children's consumer culture is not simply about greed or materialism. Instead, children and parents may use goods and experiences to establish social belonging. Having the "right" shoes, backpack, gaming system, phone, or access to particular activities can help children feel included among their peers, while lacking these items may contribute to feelings of embarrassment or exclusion (Pugh, 2009).

From a Symbolic Interactionist perspective, these everyday objects can therefore become symbols of both social class and family care. Two parents may care equally deeply for their children, yet one family may be able to afford private lessons, brand-name clothing, expensive school trips, or the latest technology, while another struggles to meet basic needs. Children may interpret these differences not simply as economic inequalities, but as signals of popularity, status, respect, or belonging. In this way, class differences acquire meaning through everyday family and peer interactions.

One criticism of Symbolic Interactionism is that its focus on small-scale interactions can give insufficient attention to the larger structures that produce inequality. Examining the meanings attached to clothing, consumption, or occupational status can help explain how people experience social class, but it does not by itself explain why some families possess far more wealth and resources than others. Broader forces such as labor markets, educational inequality, discrimination, housing patterns, and public policy are also important in shaping social stratification.

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5.9: Social Class, Parenting, and the Reproduction of Inequality

Exploring Forms of Capital

Research on social class differences in parenting can be understood through the framework of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital developed by French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu argued that inequality is not transmitted only through money, but also through factors such as knowledge, skills, relationships, and social networks.

- Economic capital refers to financial resources and material wealth, such as income, savings, property, and the ability to purchase goods, services, and opportunities (for example, private tutoring, or extracurricular activities). Housing also links social class to children's opportunities because families with more resources are often able to live in neighborhoods with safer housing, high-performing school districts, more parks, and better access to health care and extracurricular activities.
- Cultural capital refers to knowledge, skills, education, communication styles, and behaviors that are valued by dominant institutions such as schools and workplaces. This can include language use, familiarity with institutional expectations, educational credentials, and knowing how to advocate within systems.
- Social capital refers to networks, relationships, and social connections that provide support, information, or opportunities. This can include professional contacts, community ties, mentors, or relationships that help families access jobs, internships, or educational advantages.
- Symbolic capital is the prestige, status, or social recognition attached to a person, credential, object, or experience that provides social advantage within a particular social context. For example, having a degree from a prestigious university can increase a person's respectability and influence.

Together, these forms of capital help explain how advantage is transmitted and reproduced over time.

Unequal Childhoods

Sociological research shows that parenting practices often vary by social class, shaping children's educational opportunities, cultural skills, and life trajectories. In her influential book Unequal Childhoods, sociologist Annette Lareau describes how middle class parents often practice "concerted cultivation," actively developing children's talents through organized activities, negotiation with institutions, and close involvement in schooling (Lareau, 2011). These practices can help children accumulate cultural capital by teaching them how to communicate with authority figures, advocate for themselves, and navigate institutional settings. In contrast, working class parents and parents living in poverty are more likely to engage in what Lareau calls the "accomplishment of natural growth," which emphasizes care for children's physical needs, such as food, clothing, and housing, while allowing more unstructured time. These differences often reflect structural constraints, including unpredictable work schedules, economic pressures, and varying levels of familiarity with schools and other institutions.

Video: Unequal Childhoods

Duration: 5 minutes 55 seconds

In this video, sociologist Annette Lareau explains how social class shapes children's family lives and opportunities. Drawing on her research, Lareau shows that families they do not all have access to the same resources. Parenting practices, school interactions, and children's everyday experiences can help reproduce inequality over time (Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2016).

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

View this YouTube Video online

The second edition of Unequal Childhoods (Lareau, 2011) extends these findings by following many of the same children into adulthood and showing that class-based parenting differences continue to shape life outcomes over time. The middle class children raised with concerted cultivation were more likely as adults to complete college, secure stable employment, and feel comfortable interacting with institutions such as schools, workplaces, and healthcare systems. In contrast, the working class cohort raised with natural growth approaches often faced more institutional barriers and were less likely to challenge authority or advocate for special opportunities.

The follow-up study also shows that middle-class parents often continue to provide their children with financial and social support into adulthood, reinforcing cumulative advantage. Importantly, Lareau emphasizes that these differences are not about parental love or effort, but about structural inequalities in time, money, institutional knowledge, and social networks, demonstrating how social class is reproduced across generations.

Classic sociological research by Melvin Kohn found that parenting values and discipline styles often vary by social class (Kohn, 1969). Working class parents were more likely to emphasize obedience and conformity, while middle class parents were more likely to encourage independence, curiosity, and self-direction.

Kohn argued that these differences were connected to parents' work experiences. Working class jobs were often closely supervised and required employees to follow rules and directions. Middle class jobs, by contrast, were more likely to involve autonomy, problem-solving, and independent decision-making. As a result, the values parents encountered in the workplace could shape the qualities they encouraged in their children. In this way, class position influenced not only economic resources, but also everyday parenting practices and expectations.

Family Support Networks

Social class also shapes family support networks, including whether extended kin live nearby and are available to help. Research on family geography shows that close proximity to relatives can strengthen family bonds and make practical support easier, including childcare, transportation, emotional support, and help during illness or financial strain. Researchers found that high-income white households became more geographically distant from kin over time, while close proximity to kin remained more common and stable among other race-income groups (Spring et al., 2023).

While geographic mobility can create opportunities, such as moving for college or professional work, it can also reshape family support networks. For example, a middle class parent who moves away for graduate school or a career may gain educational and occupational advantages but have fewer nearby relatives to help with childcare. By contrast, a working class parent living near extended family may have more local kin support, even while facing greater economic constraints.

The U.S. College Admissions Scandal

In her 2020 article, Katerina Bodovski analyzes the U.S. college admissions scandal using Pierre Bourdieu's framework (Bodovski, 2020). The scandal revealed how some wealthy parents used financial resources to illegally secure college admission for their children through bribery, falsified athletic recruitment profiles, and manipulation of standardized testing.

Bodovski highlights that while the scandal involved illegal behavior by a small number of wealthy families, it exposed broader, legal patterns of advantage. Affluent parents routinely use economic capital (such as paying for test prep, private schools, or admissions consultants), cultural capital (knowledge of how admissions systems work), and social capital (networks and institutional connections) to help their children gain access to elite colleges. The scandal therefore illustrates how higher-income families can shape educational outcomes not only through parenting style, but through structural advantages embedded in educational systems. Bodovski argues that focusing only on the illegality of the scandal obscures the everyday, normalized ways that privilege is reproduced through family resources and institutional access.

Symbolic Indulgence and Symbolic Deprivation

In her book "Longing and Belonging", sociologist Alison Pugh examines how social class shapes children's experiences of inclusion, identity, and belonging through consumer culture (Pugh, 2009). Pugh argues that material goods and experiences can function as forms of symbolic capital that help children gain acceptance and belonging among their peers. Through the concepts of symbolic indulgence and symbolic deprivation, she shows that parents across social classes try to support their children's sense of belonging, but unequal access to economic resources shapes what they are able to provide.

Among lower-income families, Pugh observed symbolic indulgence, in which parents who could not afford a full range of childhood items (such as bikes or building blocks) prioritized the purchase of highly socially meaningful items, such as a popular gaming device, to help their children avoid social exclusion. In contrast, some middle-class parents practiced symbolic deprivation, intentionally limiting certain consumer purchases to emphasize values such as moderation or non-material sources of identity. Pugh demonstrates that consumption is not simply about materialism, but about managing children's social belonging and emotional well-being within unequal social contexts.

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5.10: Conclusion

Concluding Remarks

Social class is a powerful force shaping family life in the United States. It affects not only access to income, wealth, and material resources, but also families' opportunities for education, employment, health, housing, and social support.

This chapter has shown that social class influences patterns of marriage, divorce, fertility, parenting, and overall family well-being. It also highlights how poverty, wealth inequality, and unequal access to resources create very different life chances for families. Across generations, families pass on advantages and disadvantages through economic, cultural, and social capital, helping to reproduce class differences over time.

Understanding social class sociologically allows us to see that family outcomes are more than the result of individual choices. They are also shaped by broader systems of inequality that influence the opportunities and constraints families face. In the next chapter, we turn to sexuality and sexual orientation, exploring how identities, relationships, and social norms around sexuality also shape family life.

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6: SEXUALITY AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

6.1: Learning Objectives

6.2: Introduction

6.3: Sexual Orientation as a Spectrum

6.4: Glossary of Sexual Orientation and Related Terms

6.5: Patterns of LGBTQ+ Identification

6.6: Heteronormativity and Cisnormativity

6.7: The Lavender Scare, Stonewall, and the Policing of Sexuality

6.8: LGBTQ+ Activism, Pride, and Queer Joy

6.9: The HIV/AIDS Pandemic

6.10: LGBTQ+ Families, Family Acceptance, and Family Rejection

6.11: LGBTQ+ Youth, Families, and Inclusion in Schools

6.12: Marriage Equality

6.13: Conclusion

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6.1: Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Define sexual orientation
- Identify and explain key terms related to sexual orientation and sexuality
- Describe current demographic patterns of LGBTQ+ identification in the United States
- Explain how heteronormativity and cisnormativity can create and reinforce social inequality
- Explore how the Stonewall riots became a catalyst for LGBTQ+ activism
- Explain how LGBTQ+ activism has involved not only fighting discrimination, but also building joy, community, and belonging
- Explain the social impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on the LGBTQ+ community
- Analyze the ways family acceptance and rejection function as stressors or protective buffers among LGBTQ+ individuals
- Explain how school climate affects academic outcomes and overall well-being among LGBTQ+ youth
- Explore the importance and impact of marriage equality and current LGBTQ+ social movements

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6.2: Introduction

Human sexuality is a complex and deeply personal aspect of social life that shapes how people understand themselves and form relationships. This chapter examines sexuality through a sociological lens, exploring sexual orientation as a spectrum, the development of sexual identities, and sexual fluidity to illustrate the diverse ways people experience and express attraction. It also describes current patterns of LGBTQ+ identification in the United States.

Families are one of the first places where people learn expectations about sexuality, gender, dating, marriage, and belonging. For this reason, sexuality is not only an individual identity or experience, but also a family issue. Families may affirm LGBTQ+ members, pressure them to conform, or reproduce broader social norms about what kinds of relationships count as legitimate.

In addition, the chapter explains how heteronormativity and cisnormativity reinforce dominant norms and marginalize people who do not conform to them. It traces historical understandings of sexuality and key moments in LGBTQ+ history—from the Lavender Scare and Stonewall to the HIV/AIDS pandemic—and then turns to contemporary issues such as family support and rejection, LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools, comprehensive sex education, marriage equality, and ongoing LGBTQ+ social movements.

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6.3: Sexual Orientation as a Spectrum

Exploring Sexual Orientation as a Spectrum

Sexual orientation refers to an individual's patterns of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attraction. People use many labels to describe their orientation and these terms continue to evolve as social and cultural understandings change. LGBTQIA+ is an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and more; the "+" signals inclusion of additional identities and terms that reflect the diversity of sexuality and gender. For this chapter, and throughout the textbook more broadly, I primarily use LGBTQ+ because this term is commonly used in current demographic data and sociological research.

Sexuality is not fixed; it is fluid and individuals may identify with different labels at different points in their lives. Some people find a term that resonates and maintain that identity throughout their lifetime, while others may change how they describe themselves as their understanding of self deepens. As society's definitions and awareness of sexual orientation expand, individuals may also redefine or reinterpret their own identities in light of new perspectives and lived experiences.

For generations, people understood sexuality as something innate—an aspect of identity that a person is born with. Despite this, some have long believed that a person's sexual orientation can be changed through religion, therapy, coercion, or other harmful measures. While an individual's sexual preference or behaviors may evolve over time, research consistently shows that sexual orientation itself cannot be altered through external means. So-called "conversion therapies"—often framed as attempts to "pray away the gay"—have been widely discredited and condemned by medical and psychological associations for causing deep psychological trauma and reinforcing stigma against LGBTQ+ individuals. In 2026, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Colorado's ban on conversion therapy for minors raised First Amendment concerns when applied to licensed counselors providing talk therapy (Marimow, 2026). In Chiles v. Salazar, the Court held that the law regulated speech based on viewpoint and sent the case back to the lower courts for further review. The ruling prompted concern among LGBTQ+ advocates and medical professionals that similar state restrictions could become more difficult to defend.

The Kinsey Scale and the Sexuality Spectrum

Based on their groundbreaking research on human sexual behavior, Doctors Alfred Kinsey, Wardell Pomeroy, and Clyde Martin developed a scale to measure sexual orientation on a spectrum ranging from exclusively homosexual to exclusively heterosexual. When it was introduced in 1940s, this idea was considered revolutionary. The resulting Kinsey Scale challenged prevailing beliefs that sexuality was strictly binary, demonstrating instead that many people experience attraction to more than one gender. Kinsey's work helped establish a framework for understanding sexuality as multidimensional and existing along a spectrum rather than in rigid categories. This shifted public and scientific discussions toward greater recognition of diversity and fluidity in human sexual expression.

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Glossary of Sexual Orientation and Related Terms

Because meanings and attitudes surrounding sexuality vary across time and place, the language people use to describe sexual orientation also continues to change. More than 200 sexuality scales have been developed to capture variations in sexual orientation, making any single glossary necessarily incomplete. In addition, some terms shift in meaning over time, fall out of use, or later come to be regarded as outdated or offensive. The list below includes recognized terms using inclusive and representative language appropriate to the present day.

Important note: Not all of the terms below refer to sexual orientations in the strict sense. Some describe patterns of attraction, identity development, or a person's relationship to disclosure and self-understanding.

- Allosexual: a term describing people who experience sexual attraction. Unlike labels such as heterosexual, bisexual, or gay, allosexual does not specify the gender(s) a person is attracted to; instead, it distinguishes people who experience sexual attraction from those who identify as asexual.
- Androsexual: a term describing attraction to masculinity or to people with masculine gender expression, regardless of their sex assigned at birth or gender identity.
- Asexual (Ace): a term describing people who experience little or no sexual attraction to others. "Ace" is a common shortened term for asexual. Some asexual people may still experience romantic attraction, while others do not.
- Autosexual: a term describing sexual attraction directed toward oneself.
- Bi-curious: a term describing someone who is interested in exploring attraction to more than one gender, or who is questioning whether bisexuality may describe their experiences.
- Bisexual: a sexual orientation characterized by romantic, emotional, and/or sexual attraction to more than one gender. Although bisexuality may overlap with pansexuality, the two terms are not identical and people define them in different ways.
- Closeted: a term describing someone who is LGBTQ+ but has not publicly disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity, often because of fear of stigma, discrimination, rejection, or harm.
- Demisexual: a term describing people who typically experience sexual attraction only after forming a close emotional bond with someone. Even after such a bond is formed, sexual attraction may not always occur.
- Fluid (Sexually Fluid): a term describing a person whose sexual identity or pattern of attraction changes over time rather than remaining fixed.
- Gay: a term describing a person who is romantically, emotionally, and/or sexually attracted to people of the same gender. Although sometimes used broadly, it is also commonly used to refer specifically to men attracted to men.
- Greysexual: a term describing people who experience sexual attraction rarely, infrequently, or only under limited circumstances. It is often understood as part of the asexual spectrum.
- Gynesexual: a term describing attraction to femininity or to people with feminine gender expression, regardless of their sex assigned at birth or gender identity.
- Heteroflexible: a term describing a person who is primarily attracted to a different gender but who may occasionally experience attraction to the same gender or to other genders.
- Heterosexual (Straight): a sexual orientation characterized by romantic, emotional, and/or sexual attraction to people of a different gender. "Straight" is a common everyday synonym for heterosexual.
- Homoflexible: a term describing a person who is primarily attracted to the same gender but who may occasionally experience attraction to other genders.
- Homosexual: a term referring to attraction to people of the same gender. Although it still appears in some academic, legal, or historical contexts, many people consider it outdated or overly clinical in everyday use, and terms such as gay or lesbian are often preferred.
- Lesbian: a term describing a woman or female-identifying person who is romantically, emotionally, and/or sexually attracted to other women.
- Pansexual: a sexual orientation characterized by romantic, emotional, and/or sexual attraction to people regardless of gender identity. Pansexuality emphasizes that gender is not the determining factor in attraction.
- Queer: an umbrella term that may describe a wide range of sexual orientations and gender identities outside heterosexual and cisgender norms. Although the term was once widely used as a slur, many people have reclaimed it as a positive and affirming identity; however, some still find it offensive, so context matters.
- Questioning: a term describing someone who is exploring or unsure about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.
- Sapiosexual: a term describing attraction based primarily on a person's intelligence or intellect rather than their gender. Some people use this as an identity label, while others view it more as a preference than a sexual orientation.

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6.5: Patterns of LGBTQ+ Identification

Exploring Patterns of LGBTQ+ Identification

In 2024, approximately 9.3% of U.S. adults identified as LGBTQ+, the highest level recorded by Gallup to date (Jones, 2025). Identification was especially common among younger generations, with about 23% of Gen Z adults and 14% of Millennials identifying as LGBTQ+. This generational pattern suggests changing social attitudes, greater visibility, and increased willingness to identify openly as LGBTQ+.

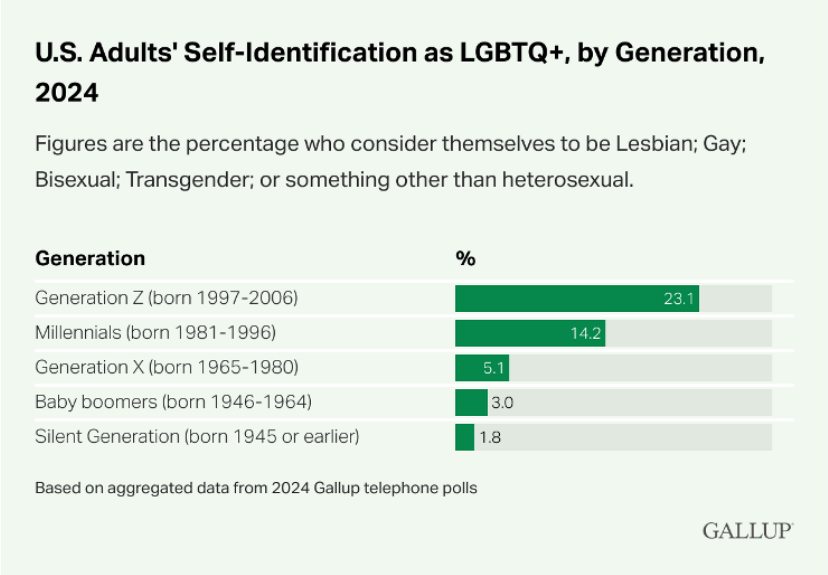


Figure 6.5.1: LGBTQ+ identification by generation, 2024. (Copyright; Jones via Gallup)

Within the LGBTQ+ population, bisexual individuals represent the largest subgroup, accounting for roughly 56% of LGBTQ+ adults. Gay and lesbian individuals together make up about 3.4% of the overall adult population, while transgender adults account for approximately 1.3% of U.S. adults (Jones, 2025). Additionally, between 1% and 2% of U.S. adults identify their gender as nonbinary, and roughly eight in ten individuals in this group also identify as LGBTQ+.

Beyond generational differences, LGBTQ+ identification also varies by gender, political orientation, and geographic location (Gallup 2025). Specifically,

- Gender differences are evident: 10% of women identify as LGBTQ+, compared with 6% of men, a gap largely driven by women's higher likelihood of identifying as bisexual.
- Gender differences are particularly pronounced among younger generations. Among Gen Z adults, 31% of women compared to 12% of men identify as LGBTQ+, and among Millennials, 18% of women versus 9% of men do so. Again, much of this gap reflects the high proportion of younger women who identify as bisexual.
- Political affiliation is strongly associated with sexual identity: about 14% of Democrats and 11% of independents identify as LGBTQ+, compared with just 3% of Republicans.
- Even sharper differences appear by political ideology, with 21% of liberals identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, compared with 8% of moderates and 3% of conservatives.
- LGBTQ+ identification also varies by residential context, with higher rates reported among people living in cities (11%) and suburbs (10%) than among those in rural areas (7%).

Moral Panic Around LGBTQ+ Visibility

There is evidence of growing public concern about rising numbers of people identifying as LGBTQ+, especially among younger

generations. Rather than viewing this increase as the result of greater social acceptance, visibility, and language for describing identity, some critics frame it as evidence that young people are being influenced, pressured, or "recruited" into LGBTQ+ identities. Sociologists examine these concerns through the concept of queer recruitment panics, which describes political and cultural anxieties that increased visibility and young people's openness to queer identities reflect social recruitment rather than genuine identity development (Brown-Saracino et al., 2021).

Brown-Saracino et al. (2021) argue that these fears resemble a moral panic: a widespread social reaction in which a group, behavior, or social change is portrayed as a threat to society's values or future. In this case, LGBTQ+ visibility is treated by some as dangerous or corrupting. From a sociological perspective, rising LGBTQ+ identification can be understood as part of a larger process of social change. As stigma declines in some settings and LGBTQ+ people become more visible in families, schools, workplaces, and media, more people may feel able to name and express identities that previous generations may have hidden or lacked language to describe.

Recent research shows how these panics are amplified through media discourse. Wippell and colleagues (2026) analyzed Fox News transcripts from 2012 to 2024 and found that anti-transgender commentary often constructs transgender people as a threatening outgroup while presenting children, women, parents, Christians, and "ordinary" Americans as groups in need of protection (Wippell et al., 2026). The authors identify strategies such as framing transgender identity as a threat to innocence, treating gender-affirming care as bodily danger, and linking transgender rights to broader claims of social decline. These patterns show how moral panics do not simply emerge spontaneously; they are produced through repeated narratives that define some groups as dangerous and others as morally under threat.

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6.6: Heteronormativity and Cisnormativity

Exploring Heteronormativity and Cisnormativity

The LGBTQ+ community has long been a marginalized group. Members of this community have faced discrimination, as well as hate and targeted violence throughout history. Efforts to deny or invalidate queer identities have taken many forms—from social exclusion and stigmatization to organized political and legal opposition. Debates over LGBTQ+ rights have often unfolded within government and public policy, sometimes resulting in legislation that expands protections and equality, and at other times producing laws that restrict or deny fundamental rights.

Heteronormativity

One of the main reasons queer people have historically been labeled as deviant and marginalized is heteronormativity: the assumption that heterosexuality, or being straight, is the natural, normal, and superior form of sexuality. Heteronormativity is reinforced through countless social practices, institutions, and cultural representations that make heterosexual relationships appear as the only legitimate standard. Sociologist Gayle Rubin describes this system as a "sexual hierarchy," in which heterosexual, monogamous, married sexuality is treated as more normal and respectable than other forms of sexuality (Rubin, 1984).



Figure 6.6.1: Wedding Rings. (Copyright; photo by Denny Müller via Unsplash) Used under the Unsplash License.

Wedding imagery often reflects heteronormative assumptions about romance and marriage. When people think of marriage, the default image is often a different-sex couple, which reinforces the idea that heterosexual marriage is the normal or expected standard.

In family life, heteronormativity appears in assumptions that children will grow up to marry someone of a different sex, that parents will be a mother and father, and that marriage and reproduction are the expected path to adulthood.

Cisnormativity

Cisnormativity refers to the assumption that all people identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. Transgender and non-binary identities challenge this assumption by demonstrating that gender identity does not always align with assigned sex and cannot be understood as universally fixed or binary.

These assumptions are often reinforced through microaggressions—subtle, routine comments or actions that communicate bias or invalidate a person's identity. Whether intentional or not, microaggressions reproduce inequality by upholding cisnormative and heteronormative worldviews. For example, a cisgender, heterosexual woman might ask a lesbian woman whether she has a boyfriend or a cisgender man might react with hostility toward a transgender man using the men's restroom. Although these interactions may seem minor in isolation, they reflect broader patterns of exclusion and can contribute to social environments in which LGBTQ+ people experience stigma, discrimination, and even violence. When gender and sexuality are viewed through a cisnormative and heteronormative lens, LGBTQ+ identities are cast as deviant or outside what is considered normal.



Figure 6.6.2: Gender neutral bathroom sign. (Copyright; photo by Kaldari via Wikimedia Commons) Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

Gender-neutral restroom signs challenge the assumption that all people fit neatly into male/female categories. They provide a concrete example of how institutions can respond to gender diversity.

To better understand how heteronormativity and cisnormativity became so deeply embedded in social life, it is helpful to examine how attitudes toward sexuality have been shaped across different cultures and historical periods.

Historical Understandings of Sexuality

Examining sexuality across cultures and historical periods reveals how societies define, regulate, and assign meaning to sexual behavior and identity. There is no single, universal attitude toward sexuality. Instead, each society constructs meanings around sexual orientation based on its cultural values, moral beliefs, and social norms.

Historically, homosexuality was not always stigmatized; in many societies it was once considered a normal and accepted aspect of sexual expression. Today, depending on geographic region and cultural context, homosexuality is more widely accepted than in the past—though varying levels of stigma and inequality still persist (Rubin, 1984).

Even within Western societies, attitudes toward sexuality have shifted dramatically over time. In ancient Greece, same-sex relationships were often understood as sexual practices rather than as markers of a fixed identity. During the Medieval period, religious authorities condemned non-procreative sex, reflecting moral concerns about sin and reproduction. The Enlightenment brought a gradual shift by drawing a stronger distinction between public and private life, making sexuality more acceptable within the private sphere. By the Victorian era of the nineteenth century, fears about moral decline and social disorder led governments and churches to promote sexual restraint. As a result, cultural attitudes toward sexuality in Western societies were far more conservative in the nineteenth century than they are today. At the same time, history reminds us that meanings attached to sexuality are always changing; what appears progressive in one era may later be seen as restrictive by future generations.

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6.7: The Lavender Scare, Stonewall, and the Policing of Sexuality

Policing Sexuality

The Lavender Scare

During the 1950s, the United States was gripped by widespread fear that communism was infiltrating American society—a period known as the Red Scare. At the same time, queer people faced a parallel wave of moral panic known as the Lavender Scare. Government officials, most notably Senator Joseph McCarthy, claimed that "homosexuals" posted a national security risk, arguing they were more vulnerable to blackmail by foreign agents. As a result, thousands of federal employees suspected of being gay or lesbian were investigated, dismissed, or forced to resign. During this period, public anxiety shifted from concerns about prostitution or moral indecency to what was described as "the homosexual menace." As Gayle Rubin (1984) observes, queer people, like communists, became targets of federal witch hunts and purges during the mid-twentieth century. This example shows how moral panic and political fear worked together to police sexuality and enforce social conformity (Rubin, 1984).

The Stonewall Riots

On June 28, 1969, one of the most significant uprisings in LGBTQ+ history began when police raided the Stonewall Inn, a popular gay bar in New York City's Greenwich Village. The raid sparked several days of resistance and protest, now known as the Stonewall Riots, which are widely regarded as a catalyst for the modern LGBTQ+ rights movement. During the 1950s and 1960s, being openly gay in the United States was extremely dangerous. Sodomy laws criminalized same-sex intimacy, and people could face fines, imprisonment, job loss, housing discrimination, family rejection, harassment, and violence because of their sexual identities.

In this context, gay bars such as the Stonewall Inn served as rare spaces where queer people could gather, build community, and express themselves with a measure of safety. The Stonewall Inn itself, reportedly operated by members of the Mafia, offered refuge but not full protection. Police raids were common and officers frequently arrested patrons for alleged "homosexual conduct" or for gender-nonconforming expression. Transgender and gender-nonconforming people were often especially vulnerable to police harassment and brutality.

When nine police officers raided the Stonewall Inn on June 28, 1969, they expected another routine operation. Instead, patrons and community members resisted. What began as a familiar act of police repression quickly escalated into a historic rebellion. As officers attempted to arrest people inside the bar, resistance spread into the streets, where crowds of onlookers and supporters gathered. As news traveled, thousands joined the protests in solidarity, transforming a single confrontation into a broader act of collective defiance. The unrest continued for four days ending on July 1, 1969.

The Stonewall Riots marked a turning point in LGBTQ+ history. They symbolized a collective refusal to accept oppression and helped inspire a more visible and organized movement for LGBTQ+ rights in the United States and beyond. Stonewall has since become an enduring symbol of resistance, activism, and pride.

Police Relations with the LGBTQ+ Community Today

The legacy of Stonewall continues to shape LGBTQ+ experiences in the present. Recent research by Vogler and Jenness shows that many LGBTQ+ people view police as both potential protectors and potential threats, with a significant number expressing distrust of law enforcement (Vogler & Jenness, 2023). This strained relationship reflects the enduring significance of Stonewall, a moment that continues to influence how queer communities understand policing, safety, and justice.

Research by Grasso and Avalos further shows how policing can disproportionately affect transgender people, especially when police encounters begin with calls from members of the public. Their work suggests that transgender and gender-nonconforming people are often drawn into police contact through public suspicion, surveillance, and gender nonconformity itself, rather than through criminal behavior alone (Grasso & Avalos, 2025). This finding is important because it highlights how policing is shaped not only by law enforcement practices, but also by broader social prejudice and public discomfort with gender diversity.

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6.8: LGBTQ+ Activism, Pride, and Queer Joy

Exploring LGBTQ+ Activism, Pride, and Queer Joy

The Stonewall Riots became a defining moment in U.S. history, drawing national attention to the systemic injustice and discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ people during this period. Although not everyone supported the confrontational tactics used during the uprising, Stonewall created a lasting legacy that helped expand LGBTQ+ visibility, activism, and demands for equality. The riots gave voice to queer communities and energized broader struggles for dignity, recognition, and rights based on sexual orientation and gender expression.

In the aftermath of Stonewall, activists organized the first Gay Pride marches to commemorate the anniversary of the riots and to celebrate identity, resistance, and community. Decades later, in 2016, President Barack Obama designated the Stonewall National Monument, making it the first U.S. national monument dedicated to LGBTQ+ history. Yet Stonewall's legacy remains contested in the present. In 2026, the Pride flag at the monument was removed and later restored after public criticism and legal pressure, illustrating how LGBTQ+ history remains a site of political struggle (Pazmino, 2026).

Amy Sherald's 2022 Painting "For Love, and for Country" reflects the ongoing struggle for LGBTQ+ visibility and inclusion (see Figure 6.8.1.). By reimagining the iconic 1945 V-J Day photograph with two Black men embracing, Sherald centers queer Black love within a national image of patriotism and public memory. The painting challenges the historical exclusion of LGBTQ+ people from dominant cultural narratives and affirms that queer love and belonging are part of the American story.



Figure 6.8.1: Amy Sherald, For Love, and for Country (2022). Oil on linen, 313 × 236.5 × 6.4 cm / 123 1/4 × 93 1/8 × 2 1/2 inches. (Copyright; © Amy Sherald, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth; photo by Joseph Hyde)

Today, Pride events are held annually around the world and June is recognized as Pride Month. At the same time, the 2026 dispute over the Stonewall flag serves as a reminder that the meanings of Pride, public memory, and LGBTQ+ citizenship are still being debated.

Sociologist Christopher T. Conner argues that LGBTQ+ activism should be understood not only through struggle and resistance, but also through joy, kinship, and collective belonging. In his 2025 Contexts article, Conner highlights the importance of queer joy as a social and political force that affirms identity, builds community, and creates spaces of care in the face of stigma and exclusion (Conner, 2025). This perspective adds another dimension to the legacy of Stonewall: LGBTQ+ activism has involved not only protesting injustice, but also celebrating survival, connection, and the right to live openly and fully. In this sense, Pride is both a form of resistance and a public expression of queer joy.

While cities such as San Francisco and New York are often associated with queer history and activism, LGBTQ+ people live in

every region of the United States and around the world, including areas where support and resources may be limited. Digital networks provide LGBTQ+ individuals with opportunities to connect with supportive communities, explore their identities, and access educational materials, mental health resources, legal information, and advocacy. Online forums, groups, and organizations can be particularly valuable for those exploring their sexual orientation or living in areas with limited LGBTQ+ support. Many of these spaces focus on specific identities, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, and asexual communities, offering opportunities for affirmation, connection, and belonging.

While the United States has made significant progress toward sexuality and gender equity, substantial work remains. Local, state, and federal governments continue to enact or uphold policies that disadvantage LGBTQ+ individuals, and hate crimes and other forms of discrimination persist. Because of this ongoing inequity and vulnerability to bias, LGBTQ+ identities remain a protected category under various civil rights and anti-discrimination laws.

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6.9: The HIV/AIDS Pandemic

Exploring the HIV/AIDS Pandemic

In the early 1980s, the HIV/AIDS epidemic marked a devastating turning point for queer communities. In its early years, the disease was wrongly portrayed by the public and many media outlets as affecting only gay men, a misconception that intensified stigma and contributed to the harmful label of a “gay cancer”. Since emerging in the late twentieth century, HIV/AIDS has claimed more than 36 million lives worldwide. The HIV/AIDS crisis also reshaped LGBTQ+ family life, as partners, friends, and chosen family members often became primary caregivers when biological families, hospitals, or the state failed to provide adequate support.

In the United States, the crisis first came to official attention on June 5, 1981, when five gay men were hospitalized with rare infections and severely compromised immune systems. Despite the growing scale of the disease, President Ronald Reagan did not publicly acknowledge HIV/AIDS as a national health priority until September 17, 1985. During this period, thousands of people were dying while desperately searching for ways to save themselves and their loved ones. In the face of limited government action and widespread public indifference, queer communities and their allies stepped in to care for those who were sick. This struggle is poignantly depicted in the 2023 film Fairyland, based on Alysia Abbott’s memoir about growing up with her gay father, Steve Abbott, in 1970s and 1980s San Francisco. The film captures their close relationship while also illustrating the profound personal toll of the HIV/AIDS crisis.

As the disease intensified, grassroots networks of care and activism emerged, centered on compassion, survival, and political action. Out of this collective organizing came one of the most influential activist groups of the era: the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). Founded in 1987, ACT UP became a major force in demanding expanded medical research, equitable healthcare, and government accountability in response to HIV/AIDS. Its members organized highly visible demonstrations to challenge misinformation and institutional inaction, staging protests at sites such as New York City Hall, the Food and Drug Administration, Wall Street, and St. Patrick’s Cathedral. Within ACT UP, smaller affinity groups formed around particular strategies and areas of expertise, allowing activists to share knowledge, build trust, and sustain collective action through years of struggle and grief.

Because of this painful history, HIV was long stigmatized and widely feared as a death sentence, including within parts of the LGBTQ+ community. Like the COVID-19 pandemic decades later, the early years of HIV/AIDS were marked by fear, uncertainty, and the absence of effective treatment. Many people diagnosed in the 1980s did not survive. Since then, however, advances in medical science have transformed HIV from a fatal illness into a manageable chronic condition. Today, HIV can be effectively treated with antiretroviral medications, and transmission can be greatly reduced through consistent condom use and preventive treatments such as PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis). Although there is still no cure, people living with HIV can now live long, healthy lives and may reach an undetectable viral load, meaning the virus is no longer measurable in standard tests and cannot be sexually transmitted. Public figures such as Queer Eye’s Jonathan Van Ness, who is openly living with HIV, have also helped raise awareness, challenge stigma, and promote education about prevention and treatment (BBC Newsbeat, 2019).



Figure 6.9.1: Jonathan Van Ness, 2018. (Copyright; photo by Cntrl+Alt+Delete via Wikimedia Commons) Licensed under CC BY 3.0.

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6.10: LGBTQ+ Families, Family Acceptance, and Family Rejection

Exploring LGBTQ+ Families, Family Acceptance, and Family Rejection

Family support and acceptance are important resources that shape emotional well-being, self-esteem, and resilience. For many LGBTQ+ people, coming out—the process of disclosing or making known one's sexual orientation or gender identity—is experienced not only as an individual process, but also as a family process. Parents, siblings, grandparents, and extended kin may respond to this information in ways that challenge their expectations about a person's future relationships, marriage, and family formation. Family responses vary widely. Some families are affirming from the beginning, others move gradually toward acceptance, and some respond with hostility, rejection, or even violence rooted in heterosexism and anti-LGBTQ+ prejudice.

When families respond with rejection, fear, or limited support, LGBTQ+ people may turn to chosen families—networks of friends, partners, mentors, and community members who provide emotional and practical support. Chosen families challenge narrow definitions of kinship by showing that family can be created through care, commitment, and mutual responsibility, not only through biology, marriage, or law. At the same time, sociologists note that ties to birth families often remain meaningful even when they are strained. Reczek and Bosley-Smith describe this expectation as compulsory kinship, or the idea that family members are expected to stay connected no matter what (Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2023). Acosta's research on lesbian, bisexual, and queer Latinas similarly shows that LGBTQ+ people may blend chosen and birth families into supportive kinship networks (Acosta, 2014).

Family Rejection

Family rejection of a person's sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression can have serious consequences for health and well-being. Rejection may include verbal harassment, exclusion from family activities, pressure to conform to traditional gender norms, or physical violence. Research shows that LGBTQ+ people who experience rejection are at greater risk of depression, substance use, suicide, and other negative health outcomes (Ryan et al., 2010).

Family Acceptance

Family acceptance can reduce stress and strengthen resilience. LGBTQ+ youth with supportive families report higher self-esteem, better physical and mental health, less internalized stigma, and lower risk of suicide. These protective effects often continue across the life course. At the same time, the documentary Gen Silent shows that older LGBTQ+ adults may face renewed pressure to conceal their identities, with some feeling forced to "go back into the closet" out of fear of discrimination in healthcare or long-term care settings (Maddux, 2010).

Some families initially struggle with feelings of grief, shame, or fear, often because they are adjusting to the loss of heteronormative expectations about their child's future. In these situations, outside support can be especially valuable. Organizations such as PFLAG have played an important role in helping families process their feelings, build understanding, and become advocates for their LGBTQ+ loved ones. The image below (see Figure 6.10.1.) shows a Pride sign that highlights how LGBTQ+ families and their children claim visibility, pride and belonging in public spaces.



Figure 6.10.1: Sign at a Pride event reading “Proud! Kids of Queer Mamas!!” (Copyright; photo by Ardfern via Wikimedia Commons) Licensed under CC BY-SA.

Parents Coming Out as LGBTQ+

Some LGBTQ+ adults, especially from older generations, entered different-sex relationships because of social pressure, stigma, or limited family-building options. When these parents later come out, children’s responses may range from shock and confusion to acceptance and greater closeness. These reactions are often shaped by the child’s age and developmental stage.

Parents who come out as transgender may face similar challenges, along with issues more specific to gender identity. Research suggests that younger children often adapt more easily and many transgender parents report that their relationships with their children remain stable or even improve after disclosure. A highly visible example is Caitlyn Jenner, whose transition took place in the public eye and drew attention to how families negotiate identity, acceptance, and change under intense social scrutiny (see Figure 6.10.2.).



Figure 6.10.2: Caitlyn Jenner, 2015. (Public domain; photo by U.S. Mission to the UN via Wikimedia Commons)

Stepfamilies and Complex Family Dynamics

Gay and lesbian step-families may face challenges distinct from those of both heterosexual step-families and same-sex-parent families. In addition to navigating the formation of a step-family, they may also need to negotiate when, how, and to whom to come out. Relationships with ex-partners and co-parents can range from supportive to conflictual, shaping the well-being of the entire family.

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6.11: LGBTQ+ Youth, Families, and Inclusion in Schools

Exploring LGBTQ+ Youth, Families, and Inclusion in Schools

Schools play an important role in shaping whether LGBTQ+ students and families feel recognized, respected, and safe. Because schools often reflect heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions, LGBTQ+ parents and students may face exclusion, lack of representation, and unequal treatment. For example, same-sex parents may not always be recognized as equal caregivers and children from LGBTQ+ families may be placed in the position of explaining their family structure to peers and teachers.

In a society shaped by heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions, people are commonly presumed to be straight and cisgender unless they say otherwise. As a result, LGBTQ+ youth are often placed in the position of having to disclose identities that fall outside what is treated as "normal." This process, commonly called coming out, does not unfold in the same way for all young people. For some, coming out can be empowering and can lead to greater self-acceptance, stronger relationships, and connection with LGBTQ+ communities. For others, it can involve fear, uncertainty, or risk, especially if they are unsure how family members, peers, teachers, or religious communities will respond.

Sexual minority, transgender, and gender-nonconforming youth may also experience identity development and disclosure differently. Some identities may be less visible unless a person chooses to share them, while other forms of gender expression may be noticed and judged by others before a young person is ready to explain or define their identity. This means that coming out is not simply a single moment or announcement. It is often an ongoing process shaped by safety, social context, family support, school climate, and exposure to stigma or discrimination.

School climate has a major impact on LGBTQ+ youth. Supportive environments are linked to better mental health, stronger academic outcomes, and a greater sense of belonging, while hostile or indifferent school settings are associated with bullying, discrimination, anxiety, depression, truancy, and lower educational achievement (CDC 2024; The Trevor Project, n.d.). Research consistently shows that LGBTQ+ students face disproportionately high rates of harassment, making schools a key site of both inequality and support.

Inclusive policies and practices can make a meaningful difference. In some states, laws require schools to include LGBTQ+ people and history in the curriculum and to strengthen protections against bullying and discrimination. California's FAIR Education Act, for example, promotes inclusive curriculum and representation. School-based LGBTQ+ clubs, such as Gender and Sexuality Alliances, are also important protective spaces that foster connection, leadership, and support. Teachers also play a critical role as allies. When educators use inclusive language, respect students' names and pronouns, intervene in bullying, and visibly support LGBTQ+ students, they help create a safer and more affirming school climate.



Figure 6.11.1: Gay-straight alliances save lives: rally in support of Bill 24 in Calgary, Canada, 2017. (Copyright; photo by JMacPherson via Introduction to LGBTQ+ Studies: A Cross-Disciplinary Approach) Licensed under CC BY.

Bathrooms and Locker Rooms

Schools can improve safety for transgender and gender-diverse students by adopting inclusive policies around bathrooms, locker rooms, names, and pronouns. Since the 2010s, disputes over bathroom and locker room access have intensified and research shows that many LGBTQ+ youth view school bathrooms as some of the least safe spaces on campus.

Physical education classes can be especially difficult for LGBTQ+ students, particularly when harassment is rooted in rigid gender norms. These challenges are often heightened for transgender and gender-diverse students who must navigate locker rooms and other gender-segregated spaces (Glisten, n.d.).

Even when major renovations are not possible, schools can take practical steps to improve safety, such as providing gender-neutral or single-stall restrooms. These options can reduce fear of harassment and give students safer access to school facilities. Although public debates often frame transgender inclusion as a safety concern, research indicates that transgender and gender-diverse youth often face heightened risks of harassment and victimization in these settings.

Comprehensive Sex Education and Contemporary Backlash

Historically, school-based sex education has often been limited to reproduction and risk prevention, such as condom use, birth control, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections. Although these topics are important, they represent only part of what comprehensive sex education can provide. A more inclusive approach offers accurate information about sexuality, emphasizes consent, mutual respect, and healthy relationships, and recognizes the diverse experiences and identities of students, including those who are LGBTQ+. By moving beyond cisgender and heterosexual assumptions, comprehensive sex education can reduce stigma, promote understanding, and support the sexual well-being of all students.

Contemporary Backlash and the “Don’t Say Gay” Law

In 2022, Florida enacted the Parental Rights in Education law, widely referred to by critics as the “Don’t Say Gay” law. The law restricted classroom instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in the early grades and became a flashpoint in national debates over LGBTQ+ visibility in schools. Critics argued that the law reinforced heteronormativity and cisnormativity by treating LGBTQ+ identities as inappropriate or controversial subjects for discussion. Florida’s law also helped inspire similar efforts in other states. Since then, several states have adopted related restrictions, while many more have considered comparable bills. These policies illustrate how gains in LGBTQ+ inclusion are often met by organized political backlash and show that struggles over sex education are not only about curriculum, but also about whose identities, families, and relationships are treated as legitimate in public life.

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6.12: Marriage Equality

Exploring Marriage Equality

In 2015, marriage equality became legal nationwide in the United States through the Supreme Court's decision in Obergefell v. Hodges. Before that ruling, some states had legalized same-sex marriage, but the right was not guaranteed across the country. Marriage, as a social institution, has long been regulated by the state, illustrating how laws and public policy can function as mechanisms of social control. For much of U.S. history, the government restricted who could marry; for example, interracial marriage remained illegal in many states until the Supreme Court's 1967 decision in Loving v. Virginia. The legalization of same-sex marriage gave LGBTQ+ couples access to many of the same legal rights and protections long reserved for heterosexual couples, marking a major milestone in the struggle for equality and family recognition. As of 2026, same-sex marriage is legal in 39 countries around the world (Pew Research Center, 2025).

At the same time, many scholars and activists emphasize that marriage equality did not end LGBTQ+ inequality. Contemporary LGBTQ+ social movements address a much wider range of issues, including discrimination in employment, housing, education, healthcare, public accommodations, and family life. The Human Rights Campaign remains one of the most visible LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations in the United States and continues to track legislation affecting the community at both the federal and state levels. Its policy work highlights ongoing conflicts over nondiscrimination protections, transgender rights, education, healthcare access, and other civil-rights issues.

Although marriage equality remains the law of the land, recent political and legal developments have raised concerns among some advocates about its long-term security. Those concerns intensified after the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade in Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization (2022).

Moreover, legal recognition does not eliminate inequality in everyday life (Movement Advancement Project, 2026). A same-sex couple may have the constitutional right to marry and still face discrimination when seeking services. For example, in California, a baker refused to sell a wedding cake to a lesbian couple, and a state appeals court later ruled that the refusal violated California civil rights law (Rosenhall, 2025). In this sense, marriage equality transformed the legal landscape for LGBTQ+ couples, but contemporary social movements make clear that formal legal rights do not automatically eliminate stigma, political backlash, or structural inequality.

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6.13: Conclusion

Concluding Remarks

Sexual orientation is not simply binary but exists along a spectrum, reflecting the diversity and fluidity of human sexuality. For many people, attraction and identity may shift over time, reminding us that sexuality cannot be fully understood through rigid categories alone. As social understandings of sexual orientation and gender identity continue to evolve, the language used to describe these experiences will also continue to change.

This chapter has shown that sexuality is shaped not only by individual experience, but also by cultural norms, historical struggles, and ongoing movements for recognition and equality. By fostering inclusive education, critical understanding, and continued advocacy, society can move closer to affirming the full diversity of human experience. In the next chapter, we turn to attraction, love, and relationship initiation, exploring how intimate relationships begin and how social forces shape the ways people form romantic connections.

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7: ATTRACTION, LOVE, AND RELATIONSHIP INITIATION

7.1: Learning Objectives

7.2: Introduction

7.3: Explaining Attraction - Evolutionary and Sociocultural Perspectives

7.4: The Role of Physical Attractiveness

7.5: Social Factors in Relationship Formation

7.6: Theoretical Models of Love

7.7: Shifts in Modern Courtship

7.8: Dating Apps and Digital Courtship

7.9: AI Companions and the Changing Meaning of Intimacy

7.10: Conclusion

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7.1: Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Compare evolutionary and sociocultural explanations for partner attraction
- Describe how physical appearance can shape initial romantic interest
- Identify key social factors that influence initial attraction
- Discuss Lee's and Sternberg's theoretical models of love
- Describe how courtship norms in the United States have shifted from traditional dating toward more informal relationship patterns, such as hanging out and hooking up
- Explore how dating apps have transformed modern courtship
- Explain how AI companions may reshape the meaning of intimacy, companionship, and relationship formation

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7.2: Introduction

Why are we attracted to some people and not others? What factors shape who we desire, date, and love? These questions remind us that love and attraction are not simply personal feelings; they are also shaped by social, cultural, psychological, and biological forces. In this chapter, we explore romantic love within its cultural, social, and biological contexts, examining both the science and sociology of attraction.

While some research explains love through evolutionary perspectives, emphasizing biological drives and reproduction, human attraction is far more complex. Who we are drawn to is also shaped by propinquity (physical and social proximity); similarity; shared values; appearance; and socialization. This chapter also introduces theoretical models that classify different forms of love, including Robert Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love and John Lee's Color Wheel Theory of Love.

Finally, the chapter examines how contemporary courtship patterns have changed, shifting from more traditional forms of dating toward informal practices such as hanging out in groups and hooking up in casual, low-commitment encounters. These changes also intersect with the rise of dating apps, which have become important spaces where many people meet, communicate, and evaluate potential partners. The chapter also considers AI companions and the changing meaning of intimacy. Together, these trends show how love and attraction are now shaped through both online and offline interactions.

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7.3: Explaining Attraction - Evolutionary and Sociocultural Perspectives

Exploring Initial Attraction: Evolutionary and Sociocultural Perspectives

When we say that we like or love someone, we are describing a form of interpersonal attraction—the degree of liking or loving we feel toward another person. Interpersonal attraction can occur in many types of relationships, including friendships and family bonds. In this chapter, however, our primary focus will be on romantic attraction between individuals.

A substantial body of research examines the factors that influence why we are drawn to certain people during initial interactions (Sprecher et al., 2008). While many people value similar qualities in potential partners—such as warmth, similarity, and physical appeal—research also finds important differences related to gender and sexual orientation, which will be explored later in the chapter. These patterns reflect the broader social and cultural forces that shape how people experience and express attraction.

Two distinct frameworks help explain how people perceive attractiveness: evolutionary theory and the sociocultural perspective. Each offers a different way of understanding human attraction. Considered together, they provide a more comprehensive view of the biological, social, and cultural forces that shape who people are drawn to and why.

Evolutionary Theory

According to Evolutionary Theory, patterns of attraction reflect adaptations that may have helped our ancestors survive and reproduce. From this perspective, men are theorized to have benefited from pursuing partners who appeared healthy and fertile. Traits such as youth, facial and bodily symmetry, a low waist-to-hip ratio, and long, shiny hair have been interpreted as possible indicators of health and reproductive potential. In this framework, men are thought to place greater emphasis on physical appearance because it may signal fertility.

Women, however, are theorized to have faced different evolutionary pressures because of unequal parental investment, including pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing. From this perspective, women's attraction patterns are expected to emphasize traits such as reliability, protection, and access to resources—qualities that may have increased the chances of offspring survival.

Sociocultural Perspective

The sociocultural perspective acknowledges that evolutionary processes may play some role in sex differences in attraction. However, it emphasizes that many differences in attraction are also shaped by social and cultural factors. From this perspective, socialization, personal experiences, and identity all influence how people form attractions and develop preferences.

Cultural norms and media representations play a powerful role in defining what is considered attractive or desirable. Beauty ideals, gender expectations, and relationship scripts are reinforced through films, advertisements, and social media. At the same time, the sociocultural perspective recognizes the role of agency. Although our ideas about attraction are shaped by the norms and values of the societies in which we live, people can still reflect on, question, and resist these expectations.

Research supports this view. In cultures with higher levels of gender equality, men's and women's partner preferences tend to be more similar (Zentner & Mitura, 2012), particularly in the importance they place on traits such as age, physical attractiveness, and financial prospects. This finding suggests that attraction is not purely biological; it is also shaped by the social environment, including the opportunities, values, and expectations within a particular society.

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7.4: The Role of Physical Attractiveness

Exploring the Role of Physical Attractiveness

Although physical appearance is not the only factor in attraction, people are often influenced by physical attractiveness, especially during initial encounters (Swami, Greven, & Furnham, 2007). This influence reflects both everyday interaction patterns and broader cultural messages. Movies, television, advertisements, and social media often promote narrow beauty standards, shaping ideas about what is considered "normal," attractive, or desirable. Advertisements also frequently use attractive models to sell products, while many people spend significant time and money trying to enhance their appearance (Langlois, Ritter, Roggman, & Vaughn, 1991).

Physical attractiveness can also produce a halo effect: the tendency to assume that someone with one positive quality, such as attractiveness, also has other desirable qualities, such as intelligence, kindness, honesty, or competence. As a result, people perceived as attractive may receive social advantages in dating, employment, education, and even the legal system. In everyday language, this is sometimes called "pretty privilege."

Although people often say that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," research suggests that some facial features are widely perceived as attractive. Ramsey et al. (2004), for example, found that even very young infants appeared to prefer certain facial features, while other studies show that symmetry and proportion are often rated as attractive (Ramsey, Langlois, Hoss, Rubenstein, & Griffin, 2004). At the same time, beauty standards are also culturally shaped and vary across societies and historical periods.

Research by Zebrowitz (1996) shows that people with youthful, or "baby-faced," features are often perceived as more likable, warm, honest, and approachable. Facial symmetry also plays an important role in perceived attractiveness, perhaps because it is associated with health and genetic fitness or because symmetrical faces are easier to process and feel more familiar (Winkielman & Cacioppo, 2001).

Research also suggests that people often prefer "average" faces—faces that blend many different features—over highly unusual or distinctive ones (Langlois, Roggman, & Musselman, 1994). In a classic study, Langlois and Roggman found that composite faces became more attractive as more individual faces were averaged together (Langlois & Roggman, 1990). One explanation is that average faces feel familiar, typical, and easier to recognize (Grammer, Fink, Juette, Ronzal, & Thornhill, 2002).



Figure 7.4.1: He does not exist. Composite photograph of ten Japanese actors, generated using AVERAGE FACE for iPhone. (Copyright; image by lessThan5pct) Licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Taken together, this research shows that attraction is not simply a matter of personal taste or romantic feeling. While people

often experience attraction as immediate or instinctive, it is shaped by a combination of social, cultural, cognitive, and biological processes. Ideas about beauty are influenced by media and cultural norms, but they are also connected to the ways people perceive familiarity, symmetry, youthfulness, and other visual cues. The following TED-Ed video, The Science of Attraction, builds on these ideas by examining how the brain and the five senses contribute to attraction, showing that romantic chemistry involves far more than “following the heart” (Maslar, 2014).

Video: The Science of Attraction

Duration: 4 minutes and 19 seconds.

Dawn Maslar’s TED-Ed video "The Science of Attraction" explains how attraction is shaped not only by romantic feelings, but also by the brain and the five senses as people assess potential partners (Maslar, 2014).

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

View this Interactive Content online

Gender, Sexual Orientation, and Attraction Preferences

You might wonder whether gender influences what people find attractive in a potential partner. Research suggests that it can, although—as with many gender differences—the similarities are often greater than the differences. Across genders and cultures, people commonly value physical attractiveness along with qualities such as kindness, humor, dependability, intelligence, and sociability (Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002). Some gendered patterns have also been observed. Heterosexual men tend to place greater emphasis on a partner’s physical attractiveness, while heterosexual women also value attractiveness but are more likely to place greater emphasis on a partner’s social status or resources (Li et al., 2002).

Many of the same factors that shape sexual attraction among heterosexual people also appear to influence attraction among lesbian women and gay men. Research by Bailey and colleagues (1994) found that gay men tend to place a level of importance on physical attractiveness similar to heterosexual men, while lesbian women more closely resemble heterosexual women in placing relatively less emphasis on physical attractiveness when evaluating potential partners (Bailey, Gaulin, Agyei, & Gladue, 1994).

Age preferences show a similar pattern. Studies suggest that gay men are often attracted to younger men, much as heterosexual men are often attracted to younger women. Lesbian women, like heterosexual women, tend to prefer partners closer to their own age (Kenrick, Keefe, Bryan, Barr, & Brown, 1995).



Figure 7.4.2: Modern Love. (Copyright; image by Geoff Livingston via Flickr) Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

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7.5: Social Factors in Relationship Formation

Exploring Social Factors in Relationship Formation

Researchers across various fields have studied the factors that influence attraction. Findings suggest that many variables contribute to why we are drawn to others, including physical attractiveness (discussed in the previous section), affect (emotional experience), propinquity (proximity), perceived rewards, similarities and differences, and self-disclosure. In the following section, some of these factors will be explored.

Propinquity

Propinquity refers to the geographic closeness or physical proximity between potential dating or romantic partners. When people describe how they met their significant other, proximity often plays a key role. Perhaps they were taking the same class, lived in the same neighborhood, or their families went to the same grocery store. These shared spaces create natural opportunities for people to meet and interact. We tend to talk more with those we see regularly and proximity gives individuals the chance to get to know one another and discover shared interests—often laying the foundation for a friendship or intimate relationship.

Importantly, proximity is not just about geographic closeness. It also includes functional distance or the frequency with which our paths cross. This idea extends to the digital world as well. In the context of online relationships, Deb Levine (2000) argues that functional distance refers to being in the same virtual space at the same time—such as a chat room, online community, or gaming platform—where individuals "cross paths" and form connections much like they do in physical settings (Levine, 2000).

Familiarity

One reason proximity matters for attraction is that it creates familiarity; people tend to be drawn to what feels familiar. Simply being around someone—or repeatedly encountering them—increases the likelihood that we will view them positively. Familiar people also feel safer because we have a sense of what to expect from them. In 1968, psychologist Robert Zajonc labeled this pattern the mere-exposure effect arguing that the more often we are exposed to a stimulus (such as a sound, object, or person), the more positively we tend to evaluate it (Zajonc, 1968).

There is a certain comfort in knowing what to expect from others; as a result, research suggests that we tend to like what feels familiar. Although this often occurs on a subconscious level, familiarity is considered one of the most basic principles of attraction (Zajonc, 1980). We are drawn to familiar people because we perceive them as safe and predictable. Familiarity, however, extends beyond faces we have seen before. We may also be attracted to people whose behavior patterns mirror those we grew up around. For example, if someone was raised in a household where a parent struggled with alcoholism, they may later find themselves drawn to partners with similar traits—not because those behaviors feel good, but because they feel known. Even when certain behaviors are unhealthy or hurtful, the familiarity of those patterns can feel psychologically comfortable.

This dynamic helps explain why it can be challenging for some individuals to leave harmful or unstable relationships. The environment in which we were raised becomes our earliest template for understanding love, safety, and connection, shaping what feels "normal" in adulthood—for better or for worse.

Homogamy

Homogamy refers to the tendency for individuals to form romantic relationships with others who are similar to themselves in key social characteristics. People often choose partners who share similar levels of education, social class backgrounds, racial or ethnic identities, religious beliefs, cultural backgrounds, or core values and attitudes. This preference for similarity helps explain why many couples resemble each other socially and why certain relationship patterns persist across generations. From a sociological perspective, homogamy is a powerful force shaping attraction, as shared experiences and common worldviews can create comfort, understanding, and a strong foundation for long-term relationships. This is known as the similarity thesis, which proposes that we are generally attracted to—and more likely to form relationships with—people who are similar to ourselves.

Researchers identify three reasons why similarity contributes to attraction: validation, predictability, and affiliation. First, similarity

provides validation. When someone likes the same things we do, it reinforces our beliefs and boosts feelings of support and acceptance. Second, similarity increases predictability. Shared values and preferences make it easier to anticipate how the other person will behave or respond, reducing uncertainty in the relationship. Finally, similarity fosters affiliation. Because we tend to like people who resemble us, they are also more likely to feel positively toward us in return. This mutual liking strengthens connection and makes relationship-building more natural and rewarding.

Homogamy is especially important because partner selection can reproduce social inequality. When people form relationships with others who share similar levels of education, income, race, religion, or class background, families may combine and pass on resources, cultural expectations, and social networks across generations.

Heterogamy

Heterogamy refers to forming romantic relationships with partners who differ from oneself in key social characteristics. In heterogamous relationships, individuals may come from different racial or ethnic backgrounds, social classes, religions, cultures, or educational levels. These partnerships can introduce diverse perspectives and new experiences, often challenging partners to navigate differences in values, traditions, and life expectations. While "opposites attract" relationships may require more negotiation and communication, they can also foster personal growth, broaden worldviews, and strengthen resilience as partners learn from each other. From a sociological standpoint, heterogamy illustrates how attraction can transcend social boundaries and how relationships can bridge different social worlds.

In these cases, differences can enhance a relationship, particularly when the partners have complementary traits. In complementary relationships, each person meets needs that the other may not fulfill on their own. For example, one partner may enjoy talking while the other prefers listening; in this case, both can feel comfortable in their roles without competing for conversational space. Complementarity can strengthen relationships but it can also introduce challenges. Friction is more likely when differences involve areas of control, values, or decision-making. For instance, if one partner tends to spend money freely while the other prefers to save, disagreements over financial decisions may arise. In these situations, differences between partners may require greater communication, compromise, and negotiation to maintain harmony in the relationship.

Heterogamous relationships can also reshape family life by bringing together different traditions, expectations, and social worlds, sometimes requiring couples and their extended families to negotiate differences around culture, religion, race, social class, or parenting.

Self-Disclosure and Emotional Connection

Sometimes we form relationships with others after sharing something personal about ourselves. Self-disclosure increases liking because it fosters trust, vulnerability, and emotional connection. We generally do not reveal our most intimate thoughts to strangers; instead, we reserve deeper disclosure for people with whom we feel close and this sharing helps build and strengthen relational bonds.

However, disclosure does not automatically lead to a meaningful relationship. It must be appropriate and reciprocal. In other words, when one person shares information, the other should respond with a similar level of openness. Disclosing too much or too little can feel uncomfortable or inappropriate and may create tension. Likewise, revealing highly personal information too early in a relationship can be unsettling or premature.

Exchange Theory and Relationship Rewards

Resembling an economic model, individuals can evaluate relationships through what is known as exchange theory. According to this perspective, we form and maintain relationships with people who provide rewards that outweigh the costs. Rewards are the benefits we hope to gain—such as tangible items (food, money, and/or gifts) or intangible ones (support, admiration, affection, and/or status). Costs, by contrast, are the undesirable tasks or emotional efforts we would prefer to avoid, such as repeatedly reminding someone to follow through on plans or spending significant time arguing over past conflicts.

Ideally, a satisfying relationship contains more rewards than costs. When people consider whether to stay in or leave a relationship, they often evaluate this balance, weighing the benefits they receive against the effort, frustration, or emotional strain involved.

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7.6: Theoretical Models of Love

Exploring Love Styles

Attitudes and perceptions of love often shift across the life course. For example, college students may view love very differently from their parents or guardians because they are in a distinct stage of life. Surrounded mostly by peers who are single or unmarried, they encounter more opportunities for dating and experimentation. At this point in their lives, the time and emotional work required for a committed relationship may feel less appealing, leading some to prefer casual encounters or “hooking up.”

In contrast, adults with children—who are more financially and emotionally tied to family responsibilities—may approach romantic relationships as partnerships in which shared goals (paying off a home, raising children, managing debt) are just as important as romance.



Figure 7.6.1: "Ambigram tattoo Love Eros" by Basile Morin is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

Lee's Color Wheel Theory of Love

The color wheel theory of love was developed by Canadian psychologist John Alan Lee in his 1973 book Colours of Love: An Exploration of the Ways of Loving. Lee identified six basic love styles, using terms drawn from Greek and Latin. He organized these styles through the metaphor of a traditional color wheel, with three primary love styles—Eros, Ludus, and Storge—and three secondary styles that emerge from combinations of the primary ones: Agape, Pragma, and Mania (Lee, 1973).

Eros is the Greek term for romantic, passionate, or sexual love—the root of the word "erotic." Lee describes Eros as a powerful blend of physical and emotional passion. It involves a desire to create mutual sexual satisfaction, feelings of security, and a deep sense of aesthetic and emotional enjoyment with a partner. An important aspect of Eros is the commitment to sexual exclusivity, as lovers strive to protect each other’s sense of intimacy and trust. Eros is a highly sensual, intense, and passionate style of love. People with this style often choose partners based on intuition or "chemistry" and they are more likely than others to describe having "fallen in love at first sight."

Ludus comes from the Latin word for "game" or "play." Lee uses this term to describe a love style focused on fun, enjoyment, and playful interaction. Ludic lovers value activities they can do together—both indoors and outdoors—and often engage in teasing, flirting, and harmless pranks as expressions of affection. For them, the excitement of gaining love and attention can feel like part of the game itself. People with a Ludic love style generally have a low tolerance for commitment, jealousy, or intense emotional dependence. They prefer relationships that remain light, flexible, and enjoyable rather than deeply serious or long-term.

Storge is the Greek term for familial or affectionate love. Lee describes Storge as a love that develops gradually out of friendship and is rooted in shared interests, mutual understanding, and long-term commitment rather than intense passion. Although Philia is the Greek word more commonly associated with friendship, Lee intentionally chooses Storge to emphasize the deeper, steady, and family-like qualities of this love style.

In contrast, Agape refers to altruistic, giving, and other-centered love. This love style emphasizes care, patience, compassion, and a willingness to place a partner's needs before one's own. Rather than being possessive or demanding, Agape is characterized by generosity and concern for the other person's well-being. Lee describes Agape as a selfless form of love offered out of a sense of duty or moral commitment without expecting anything in return. According to Lee, Agapic lovers tend to be older and more emotionally mature; their love is guided more by will, reason, and a desire to care for others than by emotion or physical attraction.

Pragma is a practical and rational style of love grounded in logic, long-term compatibility, and shared goals. Historically, arranged marriages often reflected this approach, as did unions among royalty and elite families that were formed for functional purposes such as political alliances, inheritance, or economic stability. In contemporary contexts, individuals with a Pragma style may seek partners who offer financial security, strong parenting potential, shared goals, or steady companionship. The emphasis is on practicality and long-term fit rather than passion or spontaneity.

Mania is the final love style, characterized by emotional dependence, insecurity, jealousy, and frequent emotional highs and lows. This type of love is marked by an intense need for reassurance and a fear of losing the relationship. Maniac lovers often experience uncertainty and fluctuate between extreme enthusiasm and deep anxiety, making the relationship feel unstable and emotionally overwhelming.



Figure 7.6.2: "Cloud wheel as according to John Alan Lee" by Kaitlindzurenko is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

Lee later expanded the model to include nine tertiary styles, reflecting even more nuanced blends of the primary and secondary forms. Importantly, these love styles are not mutually independent. For example, an individual may approach love from a pragmatic stance—seeking financial stability in a partner—yet still experience the insecurity and jealousy characteristic of Mania, worrying whether their partner will remain with them and maintain that stability. In practice, people rarely embody a single love style. Instead, individuals draw on multiple styles to different degrees.

Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love

Is all love the same or are there different types? Robert Sternberg explored these questions and proposed that all forms of love consist of three core components: intimacy, passion, and commitment (Sternberg, 1986).

- Intimacy involves feelings of closeness, caring, and emotional support.
- Passion refers to the physical and emotional arousal associated with love, including physical attraction, sexual desire, excitement, and the intense feelings that can draw people toward one another.

- Commitment reflects the cognitive decision to love someone and the intention to maintain that love over time.

Intimacy—through caring, closeness, and support—can be present in many types of close relationships, including a parent's love for a child or the bond shared between close friends. Passion, however, is unique to romantic love, distinguishing lovers from friends. Ultimately, depending on the type and stage of a relationship (for example, early versus long-term), different combinations of intimacy, passion, and commitment will be present.

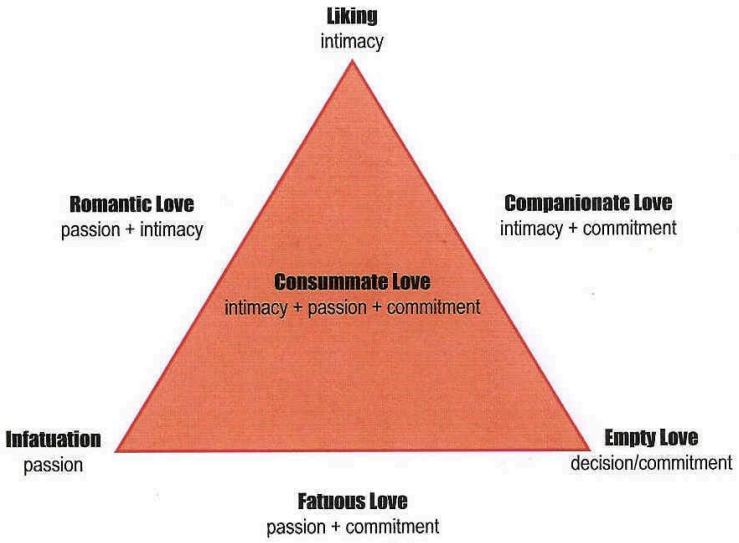


Figure 7.6.3: Triangular Theory of Love. (Public domain; via Wikimedia Commons)

Sternberg also identified several distinct forms of love, including:

1. Liking, in this context, is not used in a trivial way. Sternberg explains that intimate liking is characteristic of true friendships, where a person feels a sense of bondedness, warmth, and emotional closeness with another—but without the intense passion or long-term commitment found in romantic relationships.
2. Infatuated love is typically associated with "love at first sight." However, because it lacks both intimacy and commitment, this form of love is often unstable and may fade just as quickly as it appears.
3. Empty love occurs when a relationship has commitment but lacks both intimacy and passion. Sometimes a once-strong relationship can deteriorate into empty love as emotional closeness and desire fade over time. In cultures where arranged marriages are common, couples may begin their relationship in a state of empty love with commitment present first and intimacy or passion developing later.
4. Romantic love combines emotional closeness with physical attraction. Romantic lovers are bonded emotionally—as in intimate liking—and are also connected through intimate relations.
5. Companionate love is common in long-term relationships or marriages in which passion has diminished, but deep affection, emotional closeness, and commitment remain. It reflects a personal bond with someone you share your life with but without strong sexual or physical desire. Companionate love is stronger than friendship because it includes the added element of long-term commitment.
6. Fatuous love is often seen in whirlwind courtships or quick marriages where commitment is based mainly on passion rather than emotional closeness. Because this type of love lacks the stabilizing foundation of intimacy, it may feel intense and exciting at first, but can also be fragile or unstable over time.
7. Consummate love is considered the most complete form of love representing the ideal relationship many people strive for but few consistently achieve. Sternberg cautions that maintaining consummate love can be even more challenging than attaining it. He emphasizes the need to translate the components of love into ongoing action. Consummate love is also not necessarily permanent; for instance, if passion fades over time, the relationship may shift into companionate love.

Taking the study of love a step further, anthropologist Helen Fisher examined fMRI brain scans of people who had recently fallen in love and found that their brain chemistry showed heightened neurological activity, resembling the patterns seen in individuals experiencing a drug high (Cohen, 2007). Serotonin levels increased by as much as 40% in newly in-love individuals and many showed obsessive–compulsive tendencies. Conversely, Fisher and her colleagues discovered that when someone goes through a breakup, the brain processes the loss similarly to withdrawing from heroin (Fisher, Brown, Aron, Strong, & Mashek, 2010). In this

sense, people who say that breakups are physically painful are correct.

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7.7: Shifts in Modern Courtship

Exploring Shifts in Modern Courtship

Courtship norms in the United States have shifted dramatically in recent decades, moving away from traditional, planned dates toward more fluid and informal ways of getting to know potential partners. Among young adults, casual "hanging out" in dorms, apartments, parties, or local hangouts often replaces the structured date night of earlier generations. This marks a departure from mid-20th-century patterns in which dating typically preceded intimacy; now, for many young adults, intimacy may occur first, with dating emerging later, if at all.

At the same time, digital technology has reshaped the landscape of courtship. Meeting online has become the most common way couples in the United States first connect, surpassing introductions through friends, family, work, and neighborhood interactions. As dating scripts have evolved and as social stigma around online dating has faded, apps and platforms have emerged as central spaces where people seek both romantic and sexual partners. Together, these changes illustrate how contemporary courtship blends offline socializing, shifting cultural expectations, and the growing influence of digital matchmaking.

Hanging Out

Unlike traditional dating, hanging out does not involve one-on-one time, advance planning, or explicit expressions of romantic interest. Instead, it offers a low-pressure environment where individuals can interact, build friendships, flirt, and gradually assess potential romantic interest. Sociologists note that hanging out frequently serves as an early stage of relationship formation among adolescents and young adults, particularly in settings where formal dating is less common or less practical.

Hooking Up

Hooking up, in contrast, describes a sexual or physically intimate encounter between individuals who are not in a committed relationship and may not have expectations for future involvement. Hookups can range widely—from kissing to sex—and often occur in the context of parties, gatherings, or other social events. While hooking up allows individuals to explore sexuality and attraction without a long-term commitment, it can also involve ambiguity and differing expectations. Some participants view hooking up as purely casual, while others hope it may evolve into something more serious.

Hookup Culture

Debates about hookup culture often focus on its social and emotional consequences, which can vary widely across individuals (Wade, 2017a). Some students describe hookups as empowering and convenient, offering a way to explore intimacy without the demands of a committed relationship. Others report feeling pressure, confusion, or regret, particularly when partners have mismatched expectations about what the encounter means. Sociologist Lisa Wade, in her research on college campuses, argues that hookup culture is less about sex itself and more about a campus social script that encourages detachment, performance, and conformity to peer expectations. Wade also highlights that hookup culture is shaped by gendered inequalities: women frequently encounter more social stigma for casual sex, while men are often praised for the same behavior (Wade, 2017b). These dynamics reflect broader cultural double standards surrounding sexuality.

Situationships

In contemporary dating culture, "situationships" have become a widely used label for relationships that sit in the gray zone between "just hooking up" and a clearly defined romantic partnership (Anderson and Phillips, 2026). A situationship typically involves ongoing time together—texting regularly, spending nights together, sharing emotional support, and sometimes acting like a couple in public—without an explicit agreement about commitment, exclusivity, or the future. Sociologically, situationships reflect the weakening of traditional dating scripts and the growing expectation that people negotiate relationship rules for themselves rather than following a single cultural template. For some, ambiguity can feel flexible and low-pressure; for others, it can create uncertainty, unequal emotional labor, and power imbalances—especially when one person wants clarity and the other benefits from keeping things undefined.

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7.8: Dating Apps and Digital Courtship

Exploring Dating Apps and Digital Courtship

The rise of dedicated dating apps—such as Tinder, Bumble, Hinge, OkCupid, Match, and eHarmony—has transformed how people in the United States search for romantic partners. These platforms offer streamlined profiles, algorithmic matching, and location-based browsing, making it easier to meet people beyond one's immediate social networks. As the stigma around meeting online has declined, internet dating has increasingly displaced introductions through friends and family. Rosenfeld, Thomas, and Hausen (2019) found that meeting online had become the most common way heterosexual couples meet in the United States (Rosenfeld, Thomas, & Hausen, 2019). In their 2017 survey, about 39% of heterosexual couples reported meeting their partner online, compared with about 22% in 2009. Overall, the normalization of meeting online illustrates how courtship is increasingly shaped by technology.

At the same time, the popularity of dating apps has produced new frustrations. Some users report dating-app fatigue, describing online dating as repetitive, overwhelming, or emotionally draining. Recent media reports suggest that this fatigue has contributed to renewed interest in meeting potential partners through shared activities, including fitness-based dating apps, gym dates, run clubs, hikes, and other wellness-centered social spaces. This trend reflects both dissatisfaction with conventional swipe-based dating and the wider growth of wellness culture, where exercise, self-improvement, and lifestyle compatibility become part of how people evaluate potential partners (Defouilloy, 2026; Prendergast & DiGiacinto, 2025).

Online dating has been particularly valuable for groups historically underserved by traditional social networks, especially LGBTQ+ individuals. Young (2022) notes that gay men, lesbians, and middle-aged heterosexuals are often searching within "thin markets" where there may be fewer available or easily identifiable partners in everyday social settings (Young, 2022). As a result, these groups may rely more heavily on the internet to find potential partners. Rosenfeld, Thomas, and Hausen (2019) similarly found that same-sex couples are about three times more likely than heterosexual couples to meet online (Rosenfeld, Thomas, & Hausen, 2019).

Online Dating in the College Years

In their research, Lundquist and Curington (2019) found that many students use dating apps to meet people in ways that can feel more intentional and controlled than the chaotic, alcohol-centered party scene often associated with college hookup culture (Lundquist & Curington, 2019). Their interviews revealed that apps enable users—especially women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and students of color—to bypass the traditional "drunk hookup" script and exercise greater agency in how and where they meet potential partners.

At the same time, Lundquist and Curington warn that online dating platforms do not automatically dismantle the gendered and racial hierarchies embedded in hookup culture: many users still encounter sexist or racially discriminatory interactions even in ostensibly more "liberated" digital spaces. Their research adds nuance to the hookup-culture debate by showing that, while apps may offer safer or more intentional pathways to intimacy, they also reflect existing inequalities and ambiguous emotional outcomes (Lundquist & Curington, 2019).

Online Dating in Later Life

In her interview for the American Sociological Association's video series, Dr. Pepper Schwartz highlights how people in their seventies and eighties are increasingly turning to online dating to form new relationships (American Sociological Association, n.d.). Pew Research Center similarly reports that 12% of Americans age 70 and older have used a dating site or app, showing that online dating is not limited to younger adults (Vogels & McClain, 2023). This trend reflects broader shifts in courtship norms: as technological innovation expands opportunities for connection and as social attitudes toward online dating grow more accepting, older adults now view digital platforms as a legitimate and accessible pathway to companionship, intimacy, and love.

Video: Online Love in Later Years

Duration: 2 minutes and 38 seconds.

Dr. Pepper Schwartz discusses how older adults increasingly use online dating (American Sociological Association, n.d.).

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AI Matchmaking and Digital Dating

As increasing numbers of people rely on dating apps, many individuals report a discouraging cycle of downloading an app, experiencing ghosting—when a person abruptly stops responding without explanation—or other forms of disappointment, deleting the app, and eventually trying again. In response, several platforms are experimenting with AI-driven features designed to improve the user experience. These innovations include AI matchmakers that interview users and generate personalized matches, AI "wingmen" that offer conversation guidance, and tools that review and refine user profiles. Although early reactions to these technologies are somewhat positive, their overall effectiveness remains uncertain.

Sociologist Giora Ashkenazi (2025) argues that concerns about authenticity in AI-assisted dating should be understood through Symbolic Interactionism. Dating has always involved self-presentation, impression management, and selective disclosure, even before dating apps or AI tools. From this perspective, AI does not create "inauthentic" dating from scratch (Ashkenazi, 2025). Instead, it intensifies long-standing questions about how people perform attractive versions of themselves, how much vulnerability they reveal, and how trust is built in early romantic interaction. Ultimately, AI may assist in navigating digital dating, but it cannot substitute for the human connection, communication, and emotional effort that form the foundation of lasting relationships.

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7.9: AI Companions and the Changing Meaning of Intimacy

Exploring AI Companions and the Changing Meaning of Intimacy

The previous sections explored how relationship initiation has changed in contemporary society. Hanging out, hooking up, situationships, and dating apps all show that intimacy does not always begin through traditional dating or courtship. Instead, people may form connections through friendship groups, casual encounters, digital platforms, or relationships that remain undefined.

From Dating Apps to AI Companions

Dating apps have already transformed how people meet by turning attraction into something that can be filtered, ranked, messaged, and managed through a screen. Yet recent developments in artificial intelligence (AI) raise an even newer question: What happens when technology is not only helping people find a partner, but also becoming the companion itself? AI companions, chatbots and virtual partners are increasingly designed to provide conversation, emotional support, flirtation, and even romantic interaction. For some users, these relationships may offer comfort, validation, and a sense of being understood. For others, they may complicate existing relationships, reshape expectations of intimacy, or provide a substitute for human connection (Malfacini, 2025).

This section examines AI companions as an emerging part of the changing landscape of attraction, love, and relationship initiation. Rather than assuming that AI relationships are simply "good" or "bad," a sociological approach asks how they reflect wider social conditions: loneliness, changing family patterns, digital life, consumer culture, and the desire for connection in an uncertain dating world.

AI Companions, Infidelity and Relationship Boundaries

Companion AI apps have become increasingly visible in contemporary digital culture. Some of the most popular examples include Nomi, Kindroid, Replika, Candy.ai, and Character.ai (Roose, 2024). Unlike dating apps, which are usually designed to connect users with other people, companion AI platforms allow users to interact with artificial companions that can be personalized to fit their preferences. Users may be able to choose or shape the companion's name, personality, communication style, background story, avatar, and, in some cases, voice.

This customization is important because it can make the AI companion feel distinctive, responsive, and personally meaningful. Rather than encountering a fixed or generic chatbot, users may experience the companion as someone created for them. This sense of uniqueness and authenticity can make interactions feel more emotionally engaging and may help explain why some users develop attachments to AI companions (Pentina et al., 2023). In this way, companion AI does more than provide conversation. It may also reshape the social meanings of emotional connection, romantic attention, and intimacy.

Some people report relationships with AI companions that go beyond platonic friendship, including romantic, emotionally intimate, or sexual interactions. There is also growing discussion about whether these relationships count as cheating when a person is already in a committed human partnership. A national study conducted by DatingAdvice.com in partnership with the Kinsey Institute found that many people view falling in love with or sexting an AI companion as a form of infidelity (Cadet, 2025). As AI companions become part of people's emotional and romantic lives, they may create new relationship tensions, especially when couples have different understandings of what counts as intimacy, sexual interaction, or betrayal.

Potential Benefits and Risks

Research on the potential benefits and risks of AI companions is mixed. One 2025 study found that AI companions may help reduce loneliness, in part because users feel heard and emotionally supported (De Freitas et al., 2025). However, other research suggests that the effects of companion AI can vary widely. For some users, AI companions may provide comfort, confidence, or a sense of connection. For others, they may increase emotional dependency on technology or contribute to greater social isolation (Malfacini, 2025).

Researchers also argue that AI companionship may create risks for human relationships when AI becomes a substitute for family, friendship, or romantic partners rather than a supplement. Malfacini (2025) argues that these systems should be designed to support, rather than replace, human relationships (Malfacini, 2025).

A recent episode of The Daily examined the case of Jan Worrell, an 85-year-old woman living alone on the remote Washington coast, who used an AI companion robot for social interaction (The Daily, 2026). The episode raises sociological questions about loneliness, aging, care work, family responsibility, and whether technology can supplement—or potentially substitute for—human relationships. Jan Worrell's experience suggests that AI companionship can provide comfort, routine, and a sense of being listened to, especially for older adults living alone. At the same time, her story shows the limits of technological companionship: ElliQ could reduce silence and loneliness, but it could not replace the embodied care, shared memory, and physical presence of human relationships (The Daily, 2026; Saslow, 2026).

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7.10: Conclusion

Concluding Remarks

Because romantic relationships often become the foundation for cohabitation, marriage, parenting, and kinship ties, attraction and partner selection are also central to the sociology of the family. Who people meet, desire, date, and choose as partners can shape not only individual lives, but also family formation, household structure, and the reproduction of social inequalities across generations.

Initial attraction may feel spontaneous or mysterious, but as this chapter has shown, it emerges from a complex interplay of biological tendencies, psychological processes, and powerful social forces. Attraction is not simply a matter of personal chemistry—it is shaped by cultural norms, historical context, social opportunities, and our environment.

While this chapter explored how individuals navigate the earliest stages of romantic connection, the next chapter turns to what comes after initial attraction: the pathways through which relationships deepen, develop, and, for many, move toward partnership and marriage.

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8: MARRIAGE

8.1: Learning Objectives

8.2: Introduction

8.3: Marriage as a Social Construction

8.4: Marriage as a Social Institution

8.5: Family Households and Modern Marriage Patterns

8.6: Global Variations in Marriage

8.7: The Regulation of Marriage - Interracial and Same-Sex Marriage

8.8: Marriage and Well-Being

8.9: The Marriage Benefit Imbalance

8.10: The Sociology of Weddings

8.11: Conclusion

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8.1: Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain how marriage is socially constructed
- Explain how social forces influence partner selection for marriage
- Identify key demographic trends in modern marriage
- Compare and contrast different types of marriage
- Explain how U.S. marriage laws have historically restricted interracial and same-sex marriage
- Summarize key associations between marriage, health, and well-being
- Explain the concept of the marriage benefit imbalance
- Explore weddings as social rituals

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8.2: Introduction

Marriage is often understood as a deeply personal and romantic commitment, yet sociologists also view it as a socially constructed institution shaped by cultural, legal, economic, and historical forces. This chapter examines how marriage has changed over time, including the shift in many societies from arrangements centered largely on economics, kinship, and family alliances toward greater emphasis on individual choice, companionship, and romantic love. It also explores the social forces that shape who people marry and how marriages are formed, including patterns of endogamy and exogamy, the marriage gradient, and practices such as arranged and love marriages.

The chapter also examines contemporary patterns of marriage and household formation in the United States, including later marriage, cohabitation, and changing household structures. It considers the regulation of marriage through the histories of interracial and same-sex marriage, as well as ongoing debates about the benefits of marriage and inequalities in how those benefits are experienced. The chapter concludes by examining weddings as social rituals that communicate cultural values, social status, gender expectations, and ideas about love, family, and belonging.

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8.3: Marriage as a Social Construction

Exploring Marriage as a Social Construction

In the United States, marriage is often viewed as a symbol of romantic love and an important milestone of adulthood. A lifelong, single marriage is commonly treated as a marker of personal success and stability. However, these ideas are socially constructed rather than universal truths. Marriage is only one of many possible forms of romantic and intimate relationships. Although marriage continues to hold high social status in the United States, readers are encouraged to think critically about how marriage is defined, why it is valued, and what role it plays in society.

What image comes to mind when you think about marriage? Perhaps you picture a couple dressed in wedding attire, exchanging vows in front of family and friends (see figure 8.3.1.). Weddings are often viewed as symbolic celebrations that publicly mark the union of two individuals and, in many cases, their families as well. Others may imagine a different type of couple, family structure, or stage of married life. These varied images remind us that marriage is not a fixed or universal institution. Rather, the meanings, expectations, and ideals associated with marriage have changed over time and vary across cultures, societies, and kinship systems.



Figure 8.3.1: Weddings signal the start of a marriage and have symbolic importance in the United States, although both weddings and marriages have changed in meaning over time. (Copyright; photo by Casi Yost) Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

The History of Marriage

In Alex Gendler's animation on the "The History of Marriage", the modern idea of marriage—centered on love, companionship, and mutual happiness—as a relatively recent development is emphasized. Historically, marriage served primarily economic and political functions, such as organizing inheritance, expanding family alliances, and regulating property and sexuality. Across cultures and time periods, a wide variety of marital arrangements have existed, including polygamy, polyandry, same-sex unions, and even marriages involving deceased individuals, reflecting marriage's flexibility as a social institution. With industrialization, increased individualism and changing gender norms, marriage gradually shifted toward personal choice and emotional fulfillment.

Video: The History of Marriage

Duration: 4 minutes and 43 seconds. Gendler suggests that what many people consider "traditional marriage" is not timeless or universal but rather one version of marriage's ever-evolving form—continuously shaped by social, cultural, and economic forces (Gendler, 2014).

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The dominant social constructions of marriage in the United States have been shaped by economic forces and broader patterns of social change. Over time, society's understanding of marriage has shifted in response to these influences. Briefly summarized below are some of the major ways marriage has been defined and understood across different historical periods:

- Marriage as a social institution was the dominant model among Euro-American settlers from colonial times through the mid-20th century. In this institutional form of marriage, gender roles were clearly defined, with men and women occupying distinct responsibilities aimed at maintaining economic security and family stability. Childbearing was highly valued as children were seen as contributing to the family's labor needs and long-term economic well-being.
- Companionate marriage emerged as the U.S. economy expanded and wage labor increasingly took one spouse—usually the man—outside the home. The ideology of "separate spheres" developed, with men associated with paid work in the public sphere and women associated with unpaid domestic labor in the private sphere. Although gender roles remained clearly defined, expectations of marriage expanded to include companionship, romantic love, emotional intimacy, and sexual fulfillment. These added dimensions shaped what became known as the companionate marriage model.
- Individualized marriage developed alongside continued economic growth, expanding gender equality, and broader recognition of diverse gender identities. As gender roles became more flexible, expectations within marriage and parenting grew more fluid. In this model, marriage emphasizes personal fulfillment and self-actualization, with each partner expected not only to pursue their own growth but also to support their spouse's development. Work and parenting responsibilities are more likely to be shared and both partners are expected to communicate openly and expressively. Emotional support and encouragement—helping one's spouse become their "best self"—have become central expectations of contemporary marriage (Cherlin, 2004).

The Trad Wife

Socially constructed ideals of marriage have gained new visibility with the rise of social media and the growth of influencers—entrepreneurs who monetize their images, narratives, and videos on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Rather than highlighting the ordinary challenges and imperfections of relationships, much influencer content presents highly curated and idealized portrayals of married life.

Some online trends, such as the "trad wife" movement, explicitly romanticize mid-20th-century gender roles, emphasizing domesticity, submission and male breadwinning as desirable and natural. These representations are often designed to attract audiences and promote products, reinforcing polished and sometimes unrealistic expectations about intimacy, partnership, and family life. In a New Yorker video, Esther Perel similarly explains that even wedding vows have changed alongside broader shifts in marriage, gender, love, and social expectations, reminding us that the meanings attached to marriage are historically and culturally shaped (The New Yorker, 2019).

Who Is Left Out?

Who is excluded from this socially constructed ideal of marriage? Many forms of union formation do not fit neatly within dominant cultural expectations. When marriage is narrowly defined through heteronormative, gender-traditional, or middle-class ideals, individuals and families who do not conform to those expectations may be marginalized or rendered invisible. As discussed earlier, social identities—especially those related to gender, sexuality, race, and social class—shape the partnerships people form and the recognition those partnerships receive. Although same-sex marriage and interracial marriage are now legal in the United

States, other relationship forms, such as cohabitation, polyamorous relationships, single parenthood by choice, and long-term partnerships without marriage, often receive less social recognition and institutional support. Examining who is included and excluded helps reveal how marriage is both a personal relationship and a powerful social institution shaped by inequality, law, and cultural norms.

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8.4: Marriage as a Social Institution

Exploring Marriage as a Social Institution

Marriage as a social institution refers to a socially recognized and legally regulated union that organizes intimate relationships, reproduction, economic cooperation, kinship ties, and social status within a society. As an institution, marriage is not simply a private relationship between two individuals; it is shaped by cultural norms, legal rules, religious traditions, and economic structures that define who can marry, what roles spouses are expected to perform, and how rights and responsibilities are distributed.

How Society Shapes Who We Marry

Marriage is not just a personal or romantic choice — it is also shaped by powerful social forces. People often marry to gain emotional companionship, economic security, and social recognition. Marriage can provide legal rights, access to health and financial benefits, and a socially valued identity as a spouse. To recap on previous chapters, sociologically, most people tend to marry within certain social boundaries — a pattern known as endogamy. Although individuals are legally free to marry whomever they choose, social norms and structures still guide partner selection. Research shows that many factors shape attraction and partnership formation, including physical attractiveness, propinquity (being near one another in everyday life), and homogamy — the tendency to form romantic relationships with others who are similar to ourselves in meaningful ways. People commonly choose partners who share similar levels of education, social class backgrounds, racial or ethnic identities, religious beliefs, cultural backgrounds, or core values and attitudes. These patterns reveal that, even in societies that celebrate individual choice and love-based marriage, our social worlds continue to influence who we consider a “suitable” partner. While exogamy (marrying outside one’s group) certainly happens — and is increasingly normalized in some contexts — endogamous tendencies remain dominant in shaping marriage patterns today.

Why Do People Marry?

Even though cohabitation, singlehood and non-marital childbearing have become more common, marriage remains an important social institution in the United States. Many people marry because they see marriage as a public expression of love, commitment and long-term partnership. Marriage can also provide legal and economic protections, including inheritance rights, access to health insurance, tax benefits, hospital visitation rights and parental recognition. For some couples, marriage is also connected to religious beliefs, cultural traditions, family expectations, or the desire to create a stable environment for raising children.

Sociologists emphasize that marriage is not only a private relationship between two people; it is also a social status that carries meaning in the wider community. Andrew Cherlin (2004) argues that while marriage has become less necessary for organizing adult life, its symbolic importance remains strong. In other words, people do not have to marry in order to have sex, live together, raise children, or form a household, but marriage is still widely treated as a sign of maturity, respectability, stability and personal success. Weddings also play an important role in this process because they publicly announce the couple’s relationship and invite family, friends, and community members to recognize the union as legitimate.

At the same time, the decision to marry is shaped by inequality. Some people may want to marry but delay marriage because of financial insecurity, student debt, housing costs, unemployment or the high cost of weddings. Others may feel pressure to marry because marriage is still treated as the "normal" or preferred path into adulthood and family life. From a sociological perspective, then, marriage is both a personal choice and a social institution shaped by law, culture, religion, economics, gender, and family expectations.

Marriage and Inequality

Although marriage is often described as a personal choice, access to marriage is shaped by social inequality. In the United States, marriage is increasingly associated with education, employment stability, income, and wealth. People with more economic security may be better positioned to marry because they can afford independent housing, childcare, health care, and the costs associated with weddings and family formation. By contrast, people facing unemployment, low wages, student debt, housing insecurity, or unstable work schedules may delay marriage or avoid it altogether, even when they value marriage.

For many people, marriage has shifted from being a "cornerstone" of adult life to a "capstone" achievement—something entered into after financial security, emotional readiness, stable employment, and housing have already been established. For example, research indicates that many low-income women still value marriage highly, but see it as something that requires a high level of economic and relationship stability first. In other words, they do not reject marriage; they often place it on a pedestal and delay it until it feels achievable (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). This means that marriage can reproduce inequality: those who already have more resources are more likely to marry and then gain additional legal, financial, and social benefits from marriage. Those with fewer resources may be excluded from both marriage itself and the advantages associated with it.

The Marriage Gradient

Sociologists use the term marriage gradient to describe the traditional pattern in which men tend to "marry down" and women tend to "marry up" in age, education, and socioeconomic status (Hammond & Cheney, 2025). In this system, women are encouraged—socially and economically—to seek partners with higher income, status, or age, while men are encouraged to seek younger women or partners with lower or similar status. This dynamic shapes who is perceived as “marriageable” and creates structural disadvantages for high-status women and low-status men, both of whom face a smaller pool of eligible partners and therefore fewer marriage opportunities.

The concept is most often attributed to sociologist Jessie Bernard, who discussed it in her influential book "The Future of Marriage" (Bernard, 1982). While the marriage gradient still exists today, especially regarding age, income, and education, it has weakened due to changing gender roles, women’s increased economic independence, and shifting norms around dating, cohabitation, and partnership.

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8.5: Family Households and Modern Marriage Patterns

Exploring Family Households and Modern Marriage Patterns

This section examines how U.S. household and marriage patterns have changed over time. Although marriage remains an important family form, married-couple households now make up a smaller share of all households than in the past.

Family Households

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, a household is defined as all individuals who occupy the same dwelling unit, regardless of whether they are related by blood, marriage, or adoption. In 2024, the United States contained an estimated 132.2 million households (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2024). Approximately 64% of these households were classified as family households, while the remaining 36% were non-family households, a category that includes people living alone or with nonrelatives (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Non-family households—particularly one-person households—represent a steadily increasing share of all households, illustrating shifting social norms around independence, delayed marriage, and alternative living arrangements. In 2024, 47.1% of households were headed by married couples, the second lowest share since the all-time low of 46.8% in 2022 (USAFacts, 2025). Although married-couple households remain the most common family type, their overall share has declined in recent decades.

Modern Marriage Patterns

As of 2023, just over half of U.S. adults are married although the proportion of adults who are married is at one of its lowest levels in decades. U.S. adults were less likely to be married than at nearly any point since the Census Bureau began tracking marital status in 1940. Individuals who do choose to marry are doing so later in life. Both men and women are now older, on average, when they enter their first marriage. Research indicates that in 2024, the median age at first marriage was 28.6 years for women and 30.2 years for men (USAFacts, 2025).

Among adults who are not married, the majority have never been married, rather than being divorced or widowed. The proportion of widowed adults—the smallest of the unmarried categories—has continued to decline, reflecting improvements in life expectancy.

Marriage rates differ across racial and ethnic groups and these patterns have shifted over time. Since 2004, Asian men and women have consistently had the highest marriage rates of any racial or ethnic group in the United States. Their rates have remained remarkably stable: in 2024, approximately 60.8% of Asian men and 62.2% of Asian women were married—figures nearly identical to those reported in 1990. In contrast, marriage rates among white, Hispanic, and Black adults have declined since 1990 (USAFacts, 2025).

Cohabitation and Marriage

One of the most significant changes in modern relationship patterns is the rise of cohabitation. Cohabitation refers to unmarried partners living together in an intimate relationship. For some couples, cohabitation is a step toward marriage, allowing partners to test compatibility, share expenses and build a household before making a legal commitment. For others, cohabitation functions as an alternative to marriage, especially among those who see marriage as unnecessary, too expensive, too traditional, or inconsistent with their values.

Cohabitation has also changed the meaning of marriage. In earlier generations, marriage was often the expected starting point for living together and raising children. Today, many couples live together before marriage and some raise children without marrying. These changes show that marriage is no longer the only socially recognized path into adult intimacy and family life. However, cohabiting relationships may not receive the same legal protections, social recognition, or family approval as marriage. From a sociological perspective, cohabitation demonstrates how intimate relationships are becoming more diverse, even as marriage continues to hold symbolic and institutional power.

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8.6: Global Variations in Marriage

Arranged marriage

Arranged marriage is a union in which families—rather than the individuals themselves—play the primary role in selecting marriage partners. As explained by Sociologist Keera Allendorf, arranged marriage is “a shifting constellation of practices. At its core, it means a spouse was not chosen by the person getting married. In an arranged marriage, it is parents, often with help from other family members, who choose a spouse for their child” (Allendorf, 2020). While arranged marriages vary widely, many involve collaboration between parents and their children, with individuals choosing among family-approved partners; in other cases, strong family or cultural expectations may constrain how freely that choice is made, particularly for daughters.

Arranged marriages continue to exist in many parts of the world, though their forms and meanings vary widely across cultural, religious, and social contexts. They remain most common in regions of South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. They can also occur within certain diaspora communities in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Europe, where families maintain cultural traditions.

Arranged marriages are rooted in cultural traditions that prioritize family alliances, social status, religion, and economic security over individual romantic choice. In these systems, marriage is viewed not only as a relationship between two individuals but as a union between families, helping to reinforce kinship networks, maintain cultural continuity, and provide mutual support for the couple.

Despite criticisms in some Western contexts about limiting personal freedom, many participants in arranged marriages report high satisfaction. According to Allendorf, a misconception is that arranged marriages are loveless marriages. She notes, however, that the difference between a love and arranged marriage is often the timing of love. In the latter, the couple is expected to grow to love each other over time (Allendorf, 2020). Notably, the divorce rate for arranged marriages remains very low.

Arranged marriage is a nuanced institution that should not be equated with forced marriage. Forced marriage is treated in sociology not as a single cultural practice but as a complex phenomenon involving coercion, consent violations, power inequalities, and gender-based violence.

Semi-arranged marriage

Semi-arranged marriage blends elements of both arranged and love marriages, offering a middle-ground approach that is increasingly common in many global contexts. In these unions, families may identify or introduce potential partners—drawing on shared cultural, religious, or social networks—but the individuals themselves have substantial input in deciding whether the relationship will move forward. This hybrid model allows young people to benefit from family guidance and support while still exercising personal choice and autonomy.

Semi-arranged marriages often involve a courtship period during which the couple gets to know one another before committing. Semi-arranged marriages increasingly blend tradition with modern expectations, as young people in many societies now have more say in approving potential partners—an approach visible in popular media, such as the Netflix docuseries "Indian Matchmaking" (Netflix, 2020).

Love marriage

Love marriage, by contrast, is a union in which individuals choose their own partners based primarily on romantic attraction, personal compatibility, and emotional connection. Common in Western societies and increasingly widespread around the world, love marriage reflects cultural values that emphasize individual autonomy, personal fulfillment and the belief that romantic love should be the foundation of marriage. In these unions, partners typically meet through school, work, social networks, or online platforms, and the decision to marry is centered on mutual affection, shared interests, and long-term relationship goals. While love marriages offer greater personal choice, they can also bring challenges, as partners must negotiate differences in family expectations, cultural backgrounds and lifestyle preferences without the structured support of extended kin networks. Divorce rates tend to be higher in societies where love marriages are the norm—often attributed to the heavy cultural expectation that love alone must sustain the relationship.

Historically, many marriages in the United States reflected a companionate model focused on friendship, cooperation, stability, and shared life goals. Love was important, but marriage was also grounded in practical support and complementary gender roles, often organized around a breadwinner–homemaker structure. In contrast, modern love-based marriages emphasize romantic attraction, emotional intensity and personal choice. Partners marry because they are "in love," and the relationship is expected to fulfill deep individual needs for passion and happiness.

Andrew Cherlin and the "Marriage-Go-Round"

In many ways, the United States differs from many other Western democracies in both its cultural view of marriage and its patterns of intimate relationships. In his book, "The Marriage-Go-Round" (2010), sociologist Andrew Cherlin argues that the United States has a uniquely turbulent cycle of marriage, divorce, cohabitation and repartnering (Cherlin, 2010). Americans value marriage deeply as a cultural ideal, yet they also place strong emphasis on personal fulfillment and individual choice. This combination—high regard for marriage alongside high expectations for individual happiness—helps create a pattern in which people marry quickly, leave relationships that feel unsatisfying, and frequently form new partnerships. The U.S. emphasis on romantic love reinforces this cycle: it encourages people to seek intimate relationships and to marry for passionate love, but because those expectations are elevated, couples may become disenchanted when romantic intensity fades. As a result, the United States has higher rates of marriage, divorce, remarriage and serial monogamy—a pattern of moving through a series of committed relationships over the life course—than many other Western nations.

Cherlin's research indicates that Americans experience more transitions in and out of intimate relationships than people in most Western democracies. While countries in Northern and Western Europe often view cohabitation as a long-term alternative to marriage, Americans tend to move rapidly between marriage, divorce, cohabitation and remarriage. He calls this high turnover "relationship churning". These repeated transitions can be especially disruptive for children, who often face shifts in household structure, parenting figures, and economic stability. Cherlin argues that it is this instability, rather than single parenthood alone, that has the most profound effects on children's well-being.

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8.7: The Regulation of Marriage - Interracial and Same-Sex Marriage

Interracial Marriage

The history of marriage in the United States also shows how law has been used to regulate racial boundaries. For much of U.S. history, many states prohibited interracial marriage through anti-miscegenation laws. These laws were rooted in white supremacy and were designed to preserve racial hierarchy by controlling intimacy, family formation, inheritance, and the legal status of children. In this sense, marriage law did not simply reflect private relationships; it helped enforce racial inequality.

A major turning point came in 1967 with the U.S. Supreme Court decision in Loving v. Virginia. The case centered on Richard Loving, a white man, and Mildred Loving, a woman of Black and Native American ancestry, who married in Washington, D.C., in 1958 and returned home to Virginia, where interracial marriage was illegal. The couple were arrested and convicted under Virginia's anti-miscegenation law. The Supreme Court unanimously ruled that laws banning interracial marriage were unconstitutional because they violated the Equal Protection and Due Process Clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment (Loving v. Virginia, 1967).

Sociologically, Loving v. Virginia is important because it shows that marriage has never been only a private or romantic institution. It has also been a legal and political institution used to define social boundaries. Anti-miscegenation laws attempted to maintain racial categories by regulating who could form families across racial lines. These laws reinforced the idea that race was fixed, natural, and legally meaningful, even though sociologists understand race as socially constructed. By striking down bans on interracial marriage, the Court challenged one way that racial hierarchy had been maintained through family law.

Since the Loving decision, interracial and interethnic marriage has become much more common in the United States. Pew Research Center reports that in 1967, only about 3% of newlyweds were married to someone of a different race or ethnicity. By 2015, that figure had risen to 17%, or about one in six newlyweds (Livingston & Brown, 2017). This increase reflects broader changes in law, social attitudes, education, residential patterns, immigration, and everyday opportunities for people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds to meet. However, interracial couples may still experience prejudice, family disapproval, stereotyping, or racialized assumptions about their relationships and children.

The history of interracial marriage helps us see marriage as a site of both inequality and social change. Like the later struggle for same-sex marriage, the fight over interracial marriage reveals that access to marriage has not been equally available to all groups. Legal marriage is not only about individual choice; it is also about recognition, belonging, citizenship, and the power of the state to decide which relationships count as legitimate.

Same-Sex Marriage

Historians often grapple with the challenge of deciding how best to narrate the emergence of key social changes—and the history of LGBTQ+ law in the United States is no exception. Although many people assume these issues are recent, laws concerning sexual orientation and gender expression have existed since the nation's earliest years. Local and state governments have long used legislation to enforce what they deemed "acceptable" sexual and gender norms. For example, as Clare Sears describes in Arresting Dress, nineteenth-century San Francisco criminalized cross-dressing (Sears, 2015). These laws, and the resistance they generated, reveal both the longstanding policing of LGBTQ+ lives and the equally enduring struggles for self-expression, visibility, and legal recognition.

Consensual same-sex sexual activity became legal nationwide in 2003 when the U.S. Supreme Court's Lawrence v. Texas decision struck down remaining state sodomy laws that criminalized private, consensual sexual conduct between adults of the same sex. The ruling marked a monumental shift: for the first time, the intimate lives of LGBTQ+ individuals were explicitly protected as a matter of constitutional liberty.

The Legalization of Same-Sex Marriage

After the decriminalization of homosexuality in Lawrence v. Texas, the legal status of same-sex marriage quickly emerged as

a central focus of LGBTQ+ activism. Part of this shift was driven by backlash: opponents argued that the Lawrence ruling had gone "too far" in normalizing homosexuality. Justice Antonin Scalia articulated this concern directly in his dissent, warning that, after Lawrence, laws restricting marriage to heterosexual couples now rested on pretty shaky ground (Lawrence v. Texas, 2003).

The fight for marriage equality also reflected urgent and practical needs within LGBTQIA+ communities. During the AIDS crisis, partners were routinely denied hospital visitation, excluded from medical decision-making, and even evicted from shared homes after a loved one's death—harsh reminders of their lack of legal recognition. Marriage rights, therefore, became not only a symbolic affirmation of equality but also a matter of basic protections, dignity, and family security (D'Emilio, 2007).

In 2004, Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage. By the time the U.S. Supreme Court considered federal marriage recognition in United States v. Windsor (2013), thirty-seven states had already legalized same-sex marriage in some form (United States v. Windsor, 2013). Yet the push for marriage equality was not universally welcomed within LGBTQ+ communities. Critics, such as attorney Paula Ettelbrick, contended that marriage is a historically patriarchal institution and that pursuing access to it would not liberate queer people but instead "force our assimilation into the mainstream and undermine the goals of gay liberation (Ettelbrick, 1989). Others argued that prioritizing marriage rights diverted attention from more urgent issues—such as ending discrimination, reforming policing, and expanding protections for transgender individuals—that continued to disproportionately harm LGBTQ+ people (Duggan, 2011–2012). Despite these internal debates, mainstream LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations invested most of their political and legal resources into securing marriage equality nationwide.



Figure 8.7.1: Marriage equality rally in front of the U.S. Supreme Court. (CC BY-SA; Elvert Barnes via Flickr)

On June 26, 2015, in the landmark case Obergefell v. Hodges, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in a narrow 5–4 decision that the Fourteenth Amendment protects the right of same-sex couples to marry. The Court held that states must issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples and recognize same-sex marriages legally performed in other states. This decision made same-sex marriage legal throughout the United States, extending to same-sex couples the legal rights, protections, and social recognition associated with marriage.

Since the nationwide legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015, the number of U.S. households headed by same-sex married couples has grown steadily — rising from 425,357 in 2015 to 774,553 in 2023, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau. Even with these growing numbers, same-sex married couples still make up only a small fraction of all married couples — about 1.3% in 2023 (Hays & Minkin, 2025). Meanwhile, same-sex couples who are cohabiting (but not married) represent roughly 5.6% of all cohabiting couples.

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8.8: Marriage and Well-Being

Exploring Marriage and Well-Being

Marriage remains highly valued among U.S. adults, in part because it is associated with a range of social, emotional, health, and economic advantages. Sociologist Linda Waite and journalist Maggie Gallagher explore these advantages in their influential book, "The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially" (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Waite and Gallagher argue that marriage is associated with a range of health, economic, and family benefits, including better adult well-being, greater financial stability, and improved outcomes for children. However, these patterns should be understood as associations rather than simple proof that marriage itself causes all of these outcomes.

Health, financial, and family outcomes associated with marriage include:

Benefit Area	Examples of Benefits Associated with Marriage
Health and Well-Being	Married adults often report better mental and physical health outcomes than unmarried adults.
Longevity	Married adults tend to have longer life expectancy than unmarried adults.
Health Insurance Access	Married people are more likely to have health insurance coverage, often through a spouse or shared household resources.
Physical Health	Some research links marriage with lower rates of certain health problems, including cardiovascular disease.
Economic Stability	Married households often benefit from combined income, shared expenses, and greater financial security.
Children's Well-Being	Children in stable married-parent households often experience better economic, educational, and social outcomes.
Poverty Risk	Children born to unmarried mothers are at higher risk of poverty and related challenges.
Intergenerational Outcomes	Children raised in stable married households may have lower risks of teen childbearing, school difficulties, and later marital disruption.

Figure 8.8.1: Health, financial, and family benefits associated with marriage. Created by Sarah Earl-Novell; information summarized and adapted from Waite and Gallagher's The Case for Marriage. Copyright; author via source.

Recent research by highlights how gender dynamics shape health behaviors differently in same-sex and different-sex marriages (Stone, 2019). Women, in general, are more likely than men to monitor or encourage a spouse's healthy habits, but this tendency is strongest among women married to men and less pronounced among women married to women. Men are typically less involved in regulating a partner's health, yet men married to women show more of this behavior than men married to men. Overall, these findings show that the gender of one's spouse—not just one's own gender—shapes how couples influence each other's health practices, revealing nuanced patterns across same-sex and different-sex marriages (Umberson, Donnelly, & Pollitt, 2018)

In addition, marriage is associated with clear financial advantages. Married couples consistently show greater wealth accumulation, higher assets, and higher monthly incomes than those who are not married. 2021 census data indicates that married-couple households had significantly higher net worth than unmarried households at all age levels. For householders under 35, the median wealth of married adults was 9.2 times that of unmarried women and 3.1 times that of unmarried men (Sullivan, Hays, and Bennett 2023).

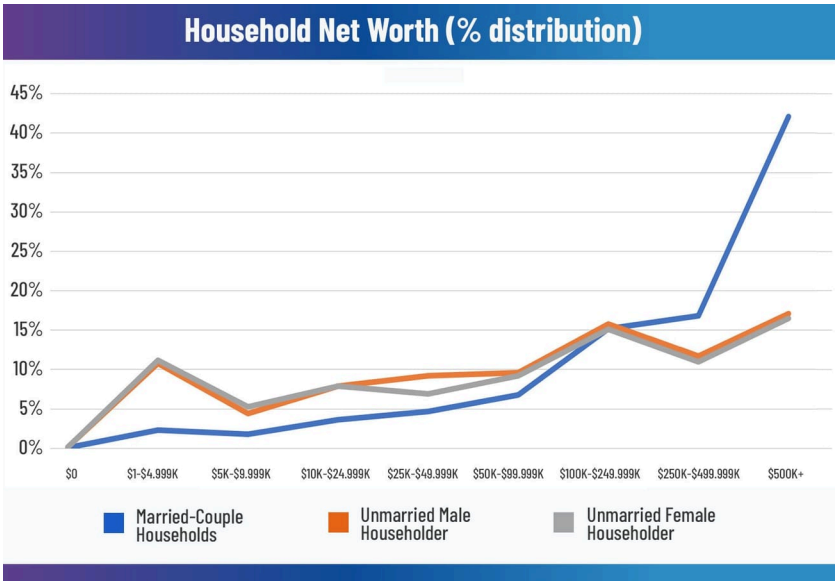


Figure 8.8.2: U.S. net worth and marital status. Data summarized from Rob Lenihan's "U.S. Net Worth: How Much Wealthier Are Married Couples?" published in The Street in 2023. Copyright; Rob Lenihan via The Street.

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8.9: The Marriage Benefit Imbalance

Exploring The Marriage Benefit Imbalance

Marriage is often associated with benefits for both women and men, but these benefits are not always distributed equally. Sociologist Jessie Bernard (1972) argued that husbands and wives could experience marriage differently, describing "his" and "her" marriage (Bernard, 1972).

When husbands and wives in the same marriage were interviewed, they often described the relationship differently, especially in relation to sexual intimacy, emotional satisfaction, household labor, and childcare. Bernard found that women were more likely to carry the burden of housework and caregiving, while men often had greater freedom to pursue paid work, leisure, and social life outside the home. In this sense, marriage could offer men and women unequal rewards, even within the same relationship.

Later research has challenged Bernard's conclusion that marriage is generally detrimental to women. Studies often find that both women and men experience benefits from marriage, although these benefits depend heavily on relationship quality and are not distributed equally. This suggests that the key sociological question is not simply whether marriage is beneficial, but who benefits, under what conditions, and at what cost.

Relationship quality is especially important. Supportive, equitable marriages may promote well-being, while high-conflict or unequal relationships can undermine it. The benefits of marriage can also vary by gender, race, social class, age, and other social locations, reflecting broader patterns of inequality.

Researchers also caution against assuming that marriage itself causes better outcomes. Some of the apparent benefits of marriage may reflect selection effects, because people who are healthier, more financially secure, or otherwise advantaged may be more likely to marry and remain married.

Overall, marriage can provide important emotional, social, and economic benefits, but those benefits are shaped by the quality of the relationship and by broader systems of inequality.

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8.10: The Sociology of Weddings

Exploring the Sociology of Weddings

From a sociological perspective, weddings are far more than private romantic celebrations. They are social rituals that communicate cultural and religious values, reinforce norms, and mark a couple's formal transition into a socially recognized family unit. Weddings often symbolize legitimacy, stability, commitment, adulthood, and family formation.

Weddings also reveal social inequalities. The style, scale, and cost of weddings often reflect social class and family resources. In the United States, weddings can be very expensive. Recent industry estimates place the average cost of a wedding in the United States at roughly $34,000 to $36,000, although costs vary widely by location, guest count, venue, season, and the number of vendors hired (The Knot, 2026; Zola, 2026). These costs show that weddings are not only emotional or symbolic events; they are also economic events shaped by consumer culture.

The wedding industry plays a major role in shaping how couples imagine the "proper" way to marry. Venues, dresses, photography, flowers, catering, rings, bachelor and bachelorette parties, registries, and social media all contribute to an idealized image of the wedding as a once-in-a-lifetime event. This can create pressure to spend money in order to display love, taste, success, and family status. From Erving Goffman's perspective, weddings can be understood as social performances in which couples and families engage in impression management, carefully presenting a particular image of themselves to others (Goffman, 1959). Through choices about clothing, décor, rituals, photographs, and social media, they communicate identities and desired impressions. These performances are not purely individual; they are shaped by broader expectations surrounding social class, gender, culture, and belonging.

Chrys Ingraham, in her chapter "Heterosexuality: It's Just Not Natural!," argues that weddings are a key part of the "heterosexual imaginary," meaning that they make heterosexuality appear natural, universal, and unquestioned (Ingraham, 2002). Wedding rituals and symbols—from the ceremony itself to the industry that supports it—can hide the ways heterosexual norms are socially constructed and enforced. By celebrating marriage as a fairy-tale ideal, weddings have historically helped define which couples are seen as "normal," and properly gendered, while marginalizing other forms of relationships. Although same-sex marriage is now legal in the United States, weddings as a social institution continue to reflect deeply rooted assumptions about gender, romance, and family.

The Modern Wedding

Contemporary weddings reveal an important paradox: even as fewer people are marrying overall, weddings themselves have become increasingly elaborate, expensive, and culturally significant. While many couples look to social media, wedding websites, and celebrity culture for ideas and inspiration, many ceremonies continue to follow a familiar traditional script: the bride being walked down the aisle, a white gown, the exchange of rings and vows, a first dance, speeches, cake cutting, and the bouquet toss (The University of Texas Permian Basin, n.d.).



Figure 8.10.1: Bride preparing to throw a bouquet to guests at a wedding reception. (Copyright; Levi Okoye via Unsplash.)

These traditions may feel personal, romantic, or timeless, but they are also socially patterned. They communicate ideas about gender, sexuality, social class, tradition, and family. Wedding planning also involves a great deal of emotional labor, and this labor often falls more heavily on women. Brides are frequently expected to manage the details of the event, coordinate family expectations, monitor the emotional tone of the day, and ensure that the wedding reflects both personal taste and social expectations, all while avoiding the negative stereotype of becoming a “bridezilla” if they appear too demanding, stressed, or controlling. In this way, even weddings that appear modern or individualized may continue to reinforce traditional gender roles.

Wedding Traditions

From a sociological perspective, wedding traditions are social rituals that reflect broader ideas about gender, family, property, commitment, and social status. Traditions such as marital name change, being "given away," and exchanging vows may feel deeply meaningful to couples, but they also carry histories shaped by law, religion, patriarchy, and changing cultural expectations.

Marital Name Change as a Social Norm

One long-standing tradition within heterosexual marriage is for a woman to take her husband’s last name. Although legally optional in the United States, research shows that about eight in ten married women in opposite-sex marriages still adopt their husband’s surname (Pew Research Center, 2023). According to Pew, 79% of women in opposite-sex marriages said they took their husband’s last name, while 14% kept their own last name and 5% hyphenated their name.

Patterns of marital name change also vary by race, ethnicity, and political views. Pew found that Hispanic women were more likely than White and Black women to keep their last name after marriage. Same-sex married couples may also adopt a shared surname, but they often use a wider range of naming practices, including keeping both names, hyphenating, blending surnames, or choosing a new shared name.

Studies find that many women describe name change in opposite-sex marriage as a symbol of unity, commitment, or family identity. Sociologists also point out that the tradition reflects historical gender expectations in which women’s identities were linked to male authority. Women with more egalitarian beliefs are more likely to keep their birth name, hyphenate, or choose another naming arrangement. Overall, marital name-changing reveals how traditional ideas about gender and family remain powerful even as norms around marriage evolve.

The Bride’s Father and the Tradition of “Giving Away”

Another wedding tradition with similar historical roots is the custom of the bride’s father walking her down the aisle and “giving her away.” Historically, this ritual symbolized the transfer of a woman from her father’s authority to her husband’s. Under English common law, the doctrine of coverture meant that a married woman’s legal identity was absorbed into her husband’s. Today, many couples reinterpret or modify this ritual as a gesture of love, support, or family blessing rather than ownership. Even so, its historical origins remind us that some marriage traditions, including surname change, emerged within social systems that treated women as dependents and linked family lineage to male authority.

Wedding Vows

Wedding vows are another example of how marriage traditions change over time. Vows publicly express what a couple believes marriage should mean, including promises of love, loyalty, care, partnership, and commitment. However, these promises are not fixed or universal. In a New Yorker video, Esther Perel explains that wedding vows have evolved alongside broader shifts in marriage, gender, love, and social expectations (The New Yorker, 2019). Older vows often emphasized duty, permanence, obedience, and clearly defined gender roles, while many contemporary vows focus more on emotional intimacy, equality, personal growth, and mutual support.

This shift reflects a broader transformation in marriage itself: from an institution organized largely around family, property, religion, and gendered obligations to one increasingly expected to provide love, companionship, personal fulfillment, and emotional connection. Weddings, then, are not just celebrations of individual couples. They are public rituals through which society expresses changing ideas about love, gender, family, status, and belonging.

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8.11: Conclusion

Concluding Remarks

Many people still marry at some point in their lives, a reminder that marriage remains a highly valued ideal in American life, even as marriage rates decline and marriage occurs later than in the past. Marriage continues to be a powerful and evolving social institution. As shown throughout this chapter, who marries whom, why people marry, and how marriages are formed are shaped not only by personal preferences but also by broader social forces. Although marriage can offer significant emotional, health, and financial benefits, these advantages are not equally shared, as gendered expectations and structural inequalities persist within many marital relationships. Weddings also function as symbolic rituals that celebrate love while reinforcing cultural norms around gender, identity, and belonging.

The next chapter turns to a closely connected aspect of family life: childlessness and pathways into parenthood, as well as the social, cultural, and economic factors that shape reproductive decision-making.

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9: CHILDLESSNESS, CHILDFREE LIVES, AND PATHWAYS TO PARENTHOOD

9.1: Learning Objectives

9.2: Introduction

9.3: Childlessness and Childfree Lives

9.4: Reproductive Choice

9.5: Pathways to Parenthood

9.6: In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)

9.7: Surrogacy

9.8: Adoption

9.9: Demographic Patterns of Fertility and Family Formation

9.10: Racial Disparities in Maternal Health Outcomes

9.11: Conclusion

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9.1: Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain how pronatalism shapes social attitudes toward childlessness and childfree lives
- Describe the historical expansion and restriction of women's reproductive rights in the United States
- Explain how the concept of women's "biological clocks" operates as both a biological reality and a socially constructed, gendered narrative
- Evaluate how access to IVF is shaped by inequality
- Define surrogacy and distinguish between traditional and gestational surrogacy
- Compare and contrast the different types of adoption
- Explain how race, social class, and education shape fertility patterns
- Describe racial differences in maternal health outcomes in the United States

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9.2: Introduction

This chapter examines both childlessness and pathways into parenthood, highlighting voluntary and involuntary childlessness, women's reproductive rights, the cultural meaning of the "biological clock," and the expanding range of family-building options. These options include biological reproduction, assisted reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilization (IVF), surrogacy, adoption, and other routes into parenthood. The chapter also considers demographic patterns of fertility and family formation, as well as racial disparities in maternal health outcomes. By situating reproductive decisions within broader demographic trends and systems of inequality, the chapter challenges the idea of a single "normal" family path and emphasizes the social forces that shape reproductive lives.

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9.3: Childlessness and Childfree Lives

Exploring Childlessness and Childfree Lives

While many adults become parents, others remain childless either by choice or because of life circumstances. Sociologists and demographers often distinguish between voluntary childlessness, in which individuals or couples intentionally decide not to have children, and involuntary childlessness, which may result from infertility, medical conditions, the absence of a suitable partner, financial constraints, or other social barriers. This distinction is important because childlessness is not a single experience; it may reflect personal preference, structural constraint, biological limitation, or a combination of these factors.

The "Biological Clock"

The idea of women's "biological clocks" is often presented as a neutral biological fact, but sociologists emphasize that it also carries social and cultural meanings. While fertility does decline with age, public concern about women's reproductive timelines reflects broader expectations that link womanhood, adulthood, and family life to motherhood. These expectations often place greater responsibility for family formation on women than on men.

Concerns about declining birthrates are expressed across a range of political and cultural perspectives. For example, a recent report from the Heritage Foundation—a Washington, D.C.–based conservative public policy think tank—argued that "when a nation fails to preserve the family, the state soon fails to preserve itself" (Severino et al., 2026). In arguments such as this, declining birthrates are sometimes framed not only as demographic or economic issues, but also as signs of cultural change. Such rhetoric can contribute to social pressure on women by suggesting that decisions about marriage, fertility, and childbearing are tied to the health of the nation.

From a sociological perspective, "biological clock" discourse can function as a form of social regulation. Framing fertility as a ticking clock may produce urgency and anxiety around childbearing, while drawing less attention to the structural conditions that shape reproductive decision-making. These conditions include the cost of childcare, access to paid parental leave, stable employment, housing affordability, reproductive healthcare, and the availability of supportive partners.

The biological clock narrative is also gendered. Men's fertility timelines are rarely discussed with the same intensity, even though men's age can also shape reproductive outcomes. This unequal focus contributes to judgments about women who delay childbearing, remain childfree, or experience infertility. It can also obscure how race, social class, sexuality, disability, and immigration status shape who has meaningful reproductive choice and support.

Voluntary Childlessness

Pronatalism refers to cultural, political, and social belief systems that promote childbearing and frame having children as normal, desirable, and morally valued. For example, widely recognized celebrations such as Mother's Day and Father's Day publicly honor and reinforce the social importance of parenting. In societies where parenthood is viewed as a standard marker of adulthood, choosing not to have children can be difficult and stigmatized, particularly for women. Viewing motherhood as a social construction shaped by gender norms and cultural ideologies—rather than as something natural, inevitable, or universally fulfilling—allows us to analyze childlessness as a legitimate and increasingly visible family pathway. This perspective situates voluntary childlessness within a broader social context, showing that not having children can represent an intentional and meaningful life course rather than a deviation from the norm.

Reasons for Remaining Childfree

Studies suggest that voluntary childlessness has become more visible and socially accepted in recent decades, especially among highly educated women and in contexts where financial insecurity makes family formation difficult.

Concerns about climate change, political instability, economic insecurity, and the future of the world also shape some adults' decisions about whether to have children. In Pew's 2024 survey, many adults under 50 who were unlikely to have children cited the "state of the world" and environmental concerns as major reasons (Minkin et al., 2024). Sociologically, these responses suggest

that childfree decisions are not only personal preferences; they are also shaped by how people assess risk, uncertainty, and the conditions into which future children would be born.

In Pew's 2024 survey of U.S. adults under 50 who were unlikely to ever have kids, 57% said a major reason was that they just didn't want to (Minkin, Horowitz, & Aragão, 2024). Other major reasons included wanting to focus on other things (44%), concerns about the state of the world (38%), concerns about the environment (26%), not really liking children (20%), and negative experiences with their own family growing up (18%). Financial reasons were also important: 36% cited the cost of raising a child and 16% said they couldn't afford to raise a child.

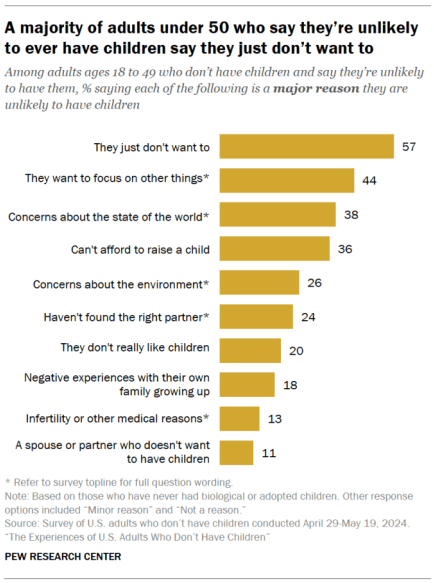


Figure 9.3.1: Reasons adults under 50 are unlikely to have children (Copyright; Pew Research Center via source).

These findings show that childfree decisions are shaped by a mix of personal preferences, economic realities, and broader social concerns. Concerns about climate change, political instability, financial insecurity, and the future of the world suggest that some adults are not only asking whether they want children, but also what kind of world future children would inherit.

Amy Blackstone's (2019) Childfree by Choice examines why some adults choose not to have children, how they navigate stigma, and what their choices reveal about gender, culture, and family norms (Blackstone, 2019). Using interviews and survey data, Blackstone shows that voluntary childlessness is intentional and diverse in its motivations, while also highlighting how pronatalism pressures people—especially women—to justify not having kids. Blackstone argues that embracing childfree lives expands our definitions of family and challenges the assumption that parenthood is the only fulfilling adult path.

In her 2024 article "A Good Time to Not Have Children," sociologist Hummer reports on her interview-based research with over 100 childless American women aged 35–50 during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hummer, 2024). She finds that many participants described the pandemic as "a good time to not have children," with the crisis highlighting existing barriers and uncertainties around motherhood—such as disruptions to fertility treatments, job insecurity, and the challenges of raising children during social upheaval. For some women, the pandemic reinforced reservations about parenthood and intensified feelings of legitimacy and relief about living without children, as they observed the burdens faced by parents and reevaluated their own life priorities. Hummer introduces the concept of "gendered uncertainty" to explain how large-scale instability made future motherhood seem less feasible and she suggests that social conditions can shape whether childlessness is viewed as a desirable and viable family pathway.

Childlessness is not a single experience and should not be understood simply as a failure or absence. Voluntary childlessness is especially important to examine because it challenges pronatalist assumptions that adulthood, fulfillment, and family life naturally lead to parenthood. Research shows that adults may choose not to have children for a variety of reasons. These choices do not mean that childfree adults reject family or care; rather, they expand our understanding of what meaningful adult lives and family relationships can look like.

Contraception and Voluntary Childlessness

People who choose to remain childfree may use a variety of methods to prevent pregnancy. These include short-acting methods such as birth control pills, condoms, the contraceptive patch, vaginal ring, or injection; long-acting reversible contraceptives such as intrauterine devices (IUDs) and contraceptive implants; and permanent methods such as tubal sterilization or vasectomy. Some people also combine methods or change methods over the life course. From a sociological perspective, the ability to act on a childfree preference depends not only on personal choice but also on access to affordable healthcare, insurance coverage, medical providers, accurate information, and reproductive rights.

Involuntary Childlessness and Infertility

Sociologists emphasize that involuntary childlessness is not only a biological or medical issue; it is also a social and emotional experience shaped by pronatalism and gender norms. In strongly pronatalist societies, where having children is treated as a marker of maturity, success, and fulfillment, infertility may carry stigma or shame. This pressure often falls especially heavily on women, who are more likely to be judged through expectations of motherhood, even when infertility involves male factors, shared factors, or unexplained causes.

Involuntary childlessness can also affect identity and social relationships. People who want children but cannot have them may find ordinary social situations painful, such as baby showers, Mother's Day or Father's Day celebrations, pregnancy announcements, or conversations centered on children. These experiences can produce grief, isolation, resentment, or a sense of being left behind as friends and relatives move into parenthood.

Reproductive lives may also include miscarriage, stillbirth, pregnancy loss, and reproductive grief. These experiences complicate simple distinctions between "having children" and "not having children," because some people may become pregnant or intend to parent but not end up with a living child. Pregnancy loss can be emotionally devastating, yet it is often treated as private or invisible. From a sociological perspective, reproductive grief is shaped not only by individual loss, but also by cultural expectations about motherhood, family, and the idea that pregnancy should naturally lead to parenthood.

Fertility is also often framed as women's responsibility, but men's reproductive health matters as well. Men's age, health, sperm quality, willingness to parent, economic stability, and relationship circumstances can all shape fertility and family formation. When fertility problems are discussed mainly as women's problems, this can reinforce gender inequality and place disproportionate emotional and medical responsibility on women.

For some individuals and couples, involuntary childlessness leads to a reevaluation of life plans, relationships, and family expectations. For others, it becomes the starting point for pursuing alternative pathways to parenthood, including fertility treatments, assisted reproductive technologies, surrogacy, or adoption. Recognizing involuntary childlessness helps distinguish people who choose not to have children from those who want children but face biological, medical, relational, economic, or legal barriers. The next sections explore how reproductive rights and family-building options shape these possibilities.

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9.4: Reproductive Choice

Exploring Reproductive Choice

Women's rights to control their own bodies—particularly in relation to reproduction and childbearing—have been historically limited. In pre-industrial societies, women generally had little control over the number of children they were expected to bear. In many cultural contexts, women were treated—formally or informally—as the property of their fathers, brothers, or husbands, which severely restricted their autonomy. As a result, women often had little control over when or with whom they had sex, whom they married, or whether they could refuse sexual activity; refusal could even place married women at risk of violence or punishment. Women's legal and social rights expanded slowly over time, with significant but uneven gains emerging primarily during the twentieth century.

Coerced Sterilization and Reproductive Inequality

Reproductive choice involves not only the right to avoid or end a pregnancy, but also the right to have children. Throughout U.S. history, these rights have not been distributed equally. During the twentieth century, eugenic policies and discriminatory medical practices subjected many marginalized women—including Black, Indigenous, Latina, disabled, incarcerated, and low-income women—to sterilization without fully informed or freely given consent. Black feminist scholar Dorothy Roberts argues that these practices reflected racialized and class-based beliefs about whose reproduction was considered desirable and whose was viewed as a social problem (Roberts, 1997). Coerced sterilization therefore represents an important form of reproductive inequality: while some women have struggled for access to contraception and abortion, others have struggled for the right to become mothers at all. This history reminds us that reproductive autonomy includes both the ability to prevent or end pregnancy and the freedom to have and raise children without coercive interference.

Video: The Movement that inspired the Holocaust

Duration: 4 minutes and 56 seconds.

This TED-Ed video examines the history of the U.S. eugenics movement, including the use of forced sterilization and its influence on Nazi racial policies (Stern & Lira, 2022).

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

View this YouTube Video online

Government Policy and Reproductive Choice

Government policies can also restrict reproductive choice by limiting family size. China's one-child policy, introduced around 1980 and phased out in 2016, generally limited many families to one child, although exceptions and enforcement varied. The policy illustrates how reproductive decisions that may seem deeply personal can also be shaped by governments and broader demographic goals.

The Birth Control Pill and Reproductive Autonomy

A major expansion of reproductive rights occurred in the early 1960s with the widespread availability of oral contraceptives in the United States. Access to the birth control pill dramatically altered the lives of millions of women by providing greater control over the timing of pregnancy and family formation. More reliable contraception made it easier for women to delay marriage and childbearing, pursue higher education, and invest in paid employment and professional careers. Research by Claudia Goldin and

Lawrence Katz (2002), for example, found that expanded access to the pill among young unmarried women was associated with later marriage and increased participation in professional careers (Goldin & Katz, 2002). These changes contributed to broader shifts in expectations surrounding gender, marriage, motherhood, and women's economic independence.

However, access to contraception has never been equally distributed. Legal restrictions initially limited access for many unmarried women, while cost, geography, race, social class, and interactions with medical institutions shaped who could exercise meaningful reproductive choice. Access has also varied considerably across countries and historical periods. The history of the birth control pill therefore illustrates both an important expansion of reproductive autonomy and the persistent inequalities that shape who is able to control whether and when to have children.

Roe v. Wade (1973)

Women's reproductive autonomy was further extended in 1973, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in Roe v. Wade that women had a constitutional right to terminate a pregnancy during the first trimester with minimal government interference. Prior to Roe v. Wade, abortion was illegal or highly restricted in much of the United States, forcing many women to carry unintended pregnancies to term or seek unsafe alternatives.



Figure 9.4.1: Demonstrators gather in Washington, D.C., in support of women's rights, including reproductive rights. (Copyright; Wikimedia)

Following the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision, abortion rights were repeatedly challenged before the U.S. Supreme Court, though for decades the Court upheld the core protections established by Roe. Public debate over abortion in the United States has been prolonged and highly polarized, closely mirroring broader political and ideological divisions. Socially conservative groups, particularly in the South, have often opposed abortion on religious grounds and out of concern that it undermines traditional family norms. In contrast, more progressive groups—common in states such as California and Massachusetts—have emphasized women's rights to bodily autonomy and reproductive choice.



Figure 9.4.2: District of Columbia. The March for Life is a large protest rally where "Pro-Life" or "Anti-Abortion" advocates express their desire to overturn Roe v. Wade. Source: Wikimedia

In recent years, major developments have significantly reshaped the landscape of women's reproductive rights in the United States. The death of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg in 2020 marked a pivotal moment, as she had long been a leading advocate for gender equality and reproductive autonomy. Her passing led to the appointment of a more conservative justice, altering the ideological balance of the Supreme Court.

Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization (2022)

This shift culminated in the Court's 2022 decision in Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, which overturned Roe v. Wade and ended nearly fifty years of federal constitutional protection for abortion rights. The ruling returned primary authority over abortion regulation to the states, resulting in a fragmented landscape in which women's reproductive rights have been significantly curtailed. The political fallout from the Dobbs decision has been far-reaching. In many conservative states, access to abortion has been dramatically reduced or eliminated, often forcing women to travel long distances to obtain care. These barriers disproportionately affect low-income individuals, people of color, and those living in rural areas (Afsari, 2026). In contrast, states with more progressive leadership have strengthened legal protections for abortion and expanded access, effectively becoming refuge states for those seeking reproductive healthcare.

Unequal Impact of Abortion Bans

Evidence suggests that severe abortion restrictions can affect fertility patterns by increasing the number of pregnancies carried to term. In states with abortion bans or major restrictions, some pregnancies that might otherwise have ended in abortion instead result in live births. These effects are not evenly distributed. People with higher incomes, flexible work schedules, transportation, and social support may be better able to travel out of state for care, while those with fewer resources often face greater barriers.

Research summarized by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (2025) finds that recent abortion bans have been associated with increases in births above expected levels in the states that enacted them (Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 2025). These findings show that reproductive policy does not affect all individuals equally. Rather, abortion restrictions can intensify existing inequalities by limiting reproductive autonomy most sharply for people with fewer economic, geographic, and social resources.

The Social Context of Reproductive Decision-Making

Importantly, decisions about whether to have children do not occur in a social vacuum. Sociologist Amy Adamczyk in her 2025 article, argues that abortion attitudes are shaped not only by personal beliefs, but also by broader national context (Adamczyk, 2025). Adamczyk shows that public opinion about abortion varies across countries in relation to factors such as religion, economic and educational development, democracy, gender equality, and media freedom. This broader perspective is useful because it reminds us that debates over reproductive rights are not simply private moral disagreements; they are also shaped by the political, cultural, and institutional environments in which people live.

Legal shifts have important implications for fertility decision-making and childlessness. When access to abortion and reproductive healthcare is limited, individuals may feel less able to control the timing, spacing, or circumstances of childbearing. For some, heightened legal uncertainty and reduced bodily autonomy may lead to delayed parenthood or decisions to remain childless, while for others it may result in carrying unintended pregnancies to term. As a result, reproductive rights are not only a matter of legal debate but also a key factor shaping family formation, life-course trajectories, and patterns of childbearing and childlessness in the United States.

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9.5: Pathways to Parenthood

Exploring Pathways to Parenthood

For many individuals and couples, the desire to have children is deeply tied to identity, life plans, intimate relationships, and cultural expectations about adulthood and family. In societies where parenthood is treated as a normal or expected life stage, the inability to have children can be experienced as more than a private medical difficulty. It can also feel like a disruption to one's imagined future, family identity, gender identity, and sense of belonging. When pregnancy does not occur, or when medical barriers make parenthood unlikely, the experience can bring profound grief, loss, uncertainty, and feelings of isolation.

For those who are involuntarily childless, possible paths to parenting include medical interventions, such as fertility medication, intrauterine insemination, in vitro fertilization, and other assisted reproductive technologies. Some people pursue donor sperm, donor eggs, embryo donation, or gestational surrogacy. Others turn to social or legal pathways, including adoption. These options can provide meaningful routes to family formation, but they are not equally accessible. Cost, insurance coverage, medical eligibility, relationship status, sexuality, age, race, citizenship status, disability, and state law can all shape who is able to pursue these pathways.

From a sociological perspective, assisted reproduction and adoption reveal that parenthood is not simply a private desire or individual achievement. It is shaped by medical systems, legal regulations, economic resources, cultural norms, and social definitions of who is seen as a "fit" or "deserving" parent. In the following section, we will explore several of these interventions and pathways in more detail, paying attention not only to how people become parents, but also to how inequality shapes access to parenthood.

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9.6: In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)

Exploring In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)

In vitro fertilization, or IVF, is a form of assisted reproductive technology in which eggs are retrieved from the ovaries, fertilized with sperm outside the body in a laboratory, and then transferred to the uterus in hopes of producing a pregnancy. IVF may be used by people experiencing infertility, single parents by choice, LGBTQ+ couples, people using donor eggs or sperm, and individuals seeking fertility preservation before medical treatment or age-related fertility decline.

The CDC uses the broader term assisted reproductive technology (ART) to refer to fertility treatments in which eggs, sperm, or embryos are handled outside the body. IVF is the most widely known form of ART. According to the CDC's 2022 national ART summary, 37.5% of ART cycles resulted in live-birth delivery and 85.9% of embryo transfers involved a single embryo transfer, reflecting a shift away from transferring multiple embryos when medically appropriate (CDC, 2024).

Other factors—including age of the person providing the eggs, egg and sperm quality, duration and cause of infertility, uterine health, and clinical expertise—also influence outcomes. Because transferring multiple embryos can increase success rates, many clinics historically used this approach; however, it also raises the risk of multiple gestations, which are associated with greater obstetric complications.



Figure 9.6.1: In vitro fertilization. (CC BY-SA 4.0; Dovidena via Wikimedia Commons.)

The microscope image above (Figure 9.6.1.) shows an egg cell during in vitro fertilization. A micropipette holds the egg in place on one side while a fine needle approaches from the other side to inject or assist with fertilization. If more embryos are created than are transferred, patients may choose to pursue embryo cryopreservation, in which embryos are frozen (typically in liquid nitrogen) for future use. This option allows patients who do not conceive to attempt another transfer without undergoing a full IVF cycle and also allows those who conceive to return for subsequent pregnancies. Hundreds of thousands of frozen embryos currently exist in the United States, reflecting both technological advances and the complex ethical and legal questions surrounding long-term storage.

Barriers to IVF Access

Cost and access strongly shape who is able to use IVF as a pathway to parenthood because the treatment is expensive, unevenly covered by insurance, and geographically limited. A single IVF cycle in the United States can cost tens of thousands of dollars and many people require multiple cycles to achieve pregnancy. As a result, IVF is far more accessible to individuals with higher

incomes, stable employment, and comprehensive health insurance. People with lower incomes, unstable jobs, or no insurance often cannot afford treatment at all.

Insurance coverage for IVF varies widely by state and many states do not require insurers to cover fertility treatments. Clinics are often concentrated in urban areas, creating additional barriers for people in rural regions who must travel long distances for care. These barriers disproportionately affect women of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, single parents by choice, immigrants, and others who already face structural inequalities in healthcare. Together, high costs and uneven access mean that IVF is not an equally available option, making parenthood through assisted reproduction far more attainable for some groups than for others.

Regulatory Practices Around IVF

IVF is often presented as a medical miracle but questions about the regulation of the IVF industry—including standards of practice, oversight, and patient protections—are increasingly salient. As journalist Susan Dominus discusses in the Daily episode "An I.V.F. Mix-Up and an Impossible Choice," the field remains largely unregulated, meaning that errors can have life-altering consequences for families who have already invested enormous emotional, physical, and financial resources into fertility treatment (The Daily, 2026). Dominus's reporting explores a rare but devastating case in which a fertility clinic accidentally swapped the embryos of two families, resulting in each woman carrying and giving birth to a child who was not genetically related to her partner. When the mistake was uncovered through DNA testing several months later, the families faced the heartbreaking decision to return the children to their genetic parents.

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9.7: Surrogacy

Exploring Surrogacy

Surrogacy is a reproductive arrangement in which a person, known as the surrogate or gestational carrier, carries and gives birth to a baby for another individual or couple, known as the intended parent or intended parents. Surrogacy may be used when pregnancy is biologically impossible, medically risky, or unavailable because of infertility, uterine factors, chronic health conditions, LGBTQ+ family formation, or single parenthood by choice. It can provide an important pathway to parenthood while also raising legal, ethical, economic, and emotional questions about reproduction, kinship, and family formation.

Forms of Surrogacy

There are two primary forms of surrogacy:

- Traditional surrogacy refers to an arrangement in which the surrogate provides the egg and therefore has a genetic relationship to the child. Conception typically occurs through insemination using sperm from the intended father or a sperm donor. Because the surrogate is also a genetic parent, traditional surrogacy can raise additional legal and emotional complexities and is far less common today.
- Gestational surrogacy refers to an arrangement in which the surrogate carries an embryo created through in vitro fertilization using eggs and sperm from the intended parent(s), donors, or a combination of both. In this arrangement, the surrogate has no genetic relationship to the child and is sometimes referred to as a gestational carrier. Gestational surrogacy is now the more common form of surrogacy (RESOLVE: The National Infertility Association, n.d.; Yale Medicine, n.d).



Figure 9.7.1: Surrogate mother preparing to give birth with the intended parents present. (Public domain; U.S. Air Force via Wikimedia Commons.)

Surrogacy Practices

Surrogacy practices vary widely across legal and cultural contexts. In the United States, surrogacy is regulated primarily at the state level, meaning that rules about contracts, compensation, parental rights, and medical decision-making differ across states. Internationally, some countries permit only altruistic surrogacy, in which the surrogate may be reimbursed for pregnancy-related expenses but does not receive a commercial fee. Other countries restrict or prohibit commercial surrogacy because of concerns about exploitation, unequal power relations, and cross-border reproductive markets. These differences show that surrogacy is not only a medical pathway to parenthood, but also a legal and ethical issue shaped by regulation and inequality.

Surrogacy and Stratified Reproduction

Sociologists often analyze surrogacy through the concept of stratified reproduction, which refers to the idea that some people's reproductive choices are supported, valued, and protected more than others. Surrogacy can expand family possibilities for intended parents, especially those who cannot safely or biologically carry a pregnancy. At the same time, it is highly unequal because it often requires substantial financial resources, legal assistance, and access to specialized medical care. These inequalities are especially visible in commercial and cross-border arrangements, where intended parents may be much wealthier than the women who serve as surrogates.

Ethical and Sociological Issues

Debates about surrogacy often focus on whether paid surrogacy exploits women's reproductive labor or whether it can be empowering when surrogates are well informed, fairly compensated, legally protected, and able to make autonomous decisions. Recent public backlash to singer Meghan Trainor's surrogate birth announcement illustrates some of the social tensions that continue to surround surrogacy, reproductive choice, and expectations of motherhood (McFall, 2026). These debates often reflect broader anxieties about what counts as "natural" motherhood, who is seen as a legitimate parent, and whether reproduction should involve contracts, compensation, or third-party assistance. Surrogacy also challenges traditional definitions of kinship by separating genetic, gestational, legal, and social parenthood.

From a sociological perspective, surrogacy can be both a meaningful route to family formation and a practice shaped by unequal access, legal uncertainty, and market forces. The central question is not simply whether surrogacy should exist, but how it can be regulated in ways that protect surrogates, support intended parents, safeguard children, and reduce inequality within reproductive labor.

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9.8: Adoption

Exploring Adoption

Adoption is one of several pathways through which families are formed. It involves the legal transfer of parental rights and responsibilities for a child from one set of caregivers to another, and it can take multiple forms, resulting in a wide variety of family arrangements. In the United States, national statistics on adoption are difficult to compile because adoption types are not tracked consistently across agencies, courts, states, and data systems (Kreider & Lofquist, 2014). Some adoptions occur through foster care, others through private domestic adoption, international adoption, stepparent adoption, or kinship adoption, and these categories are not always captured in the same way.

Available estimates suggest that adoption is relatively uncommon but socially significant. The Adoption History Project estimates that approximately 5 million Americans are adoptees, that 2–4% of U.S. families have adopted, and that about 2.5% of children under age 18 are adopted (Herman, n.d.). These figures show that adoption is not the dominant pathway into family life, but it remains an enduring and important form of family formation.

Sociologically, adoption reveals that family is not formed only through biology. Adoption creates legal, emotional, and social parent-child relationships, showing that kinship is shaped by law, caregiving, attachment, and recognition as well as by genetic ties. At the same time, adoption is shaped by inequality. Race, social class, age, disability, immigration status, sexuality, marital status, and state policy can all influence who is considered an eligible adoptive parent and which children are seen as "easier" or "harder" to place.

Tens of thousands of children in foster care are waiting for permanent families. Some have adoption identified as their long-term plan, while others are already legally free to be adopted, meaning the legal rights of their birth parents have been ended or relinquished. Many are school-aged; AdoptUSKids reports that children available for adoption from foster care generally range from toddlerhood to age 21, with a median age of about eight (AdoptUSKids, n.d.). There is often a mismatch between the children who need adoptive placements and the preferences of many prospective adoptive parents. While many prospective parents hope to adopt an infant, the number of infants legally available for adoption is relatively small. As a result, older children, sibling groups, children with disabilities, and children with complex trauma histories may wait longer for permanent adoptive families.



Figure 9.8.1: "Let love define family" foster and adoption banner from the Human Rights Campaign's Raise a Child campaign in Los Angeles. (Copyright; Tony Webster via Wikimedia Commons.)

Research shows that, for some birth parents, placing a baby for adoption can be an alternative to parenting when they do not feel prepared, able, or willing to assume parental responsibilities. A best-practice approach is therefore to ensure that individuals

experiencing unplanned or unwanted pregnancies receive accurate, comprehensive, and non-directive information about all available options, including parenting, adoption, and the legal and emotional processes associated with each. In the United States, birth parents often participate in selecting their baby's adoptive parents, particularly in private domestic infant adoption.

Types of Adoption

There are several types of adoptive families, reflecting the diverse pathways through which adoption can create or expand family relationships. Common types of adoption in the United States include:

- Infant, newborn, or domestic adoption: An adoption in which a child born in the United States is placed with adoptive parents, often shortly after birth.
- International, intercountry, or transnational adoption: An adoption in which a child born in one country is adopted by parents living in another country. Some international adoptees have experienced institutional care, poverty, displacement, or the loss of one or both parents.
- Kinship adoption: An adoption in which a child is adopted by a relative, such as a grandparent, aunt, uncle, sibling, or another extended family member. Kinship adoption may help preserve family ties, cultural connections, and continuity of care.
- Foster care adoption: An adoption in which a child who has been removed from their primary caregivers because of safety concerns, such as abuse, neglect, or inability to meet the child's needs, is later adopted by foster parents, relatives, or another permanent caregiver.
- Stepparent adoption: An adoption in which one parent's spouse becomes the child's legal parent and assumes full parental rights and responsibilities. Stepparent adoption is often used to legally recognize an existing parent-child relationship within a blended family.

Levels of Openness and Degrees of Contact

Before and after the legal transfer of parental rights, birth and adoptive families may decide whether, and to what extent, they will remain in contact. These arrangements are often described as levels of openness or degrees of contact. Openness exists along a continuum, ranging from closed adoption, in which no identifying information or contact is shared, to open adoption, in which birth and adoptive families maintain some level of ongoing communication or relationship.

- Non-identifying information: Information that allows members of the adoption triad—birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptees—to learn general details about one another without revealing identity. Examples may include first names, physical descriptions, occupations, education levels, personality traits, hobbies, interests, religious affiliation, cultural background, and medical history.
- Closed adoption: An adoption arrangement involving confidentiality and sealed records. Birth and adoptive families do not exchange identifying information and there is no ongoing contact between the families. Historically, closed adoption was more common, although practices have shifted over time.
- Semi-open adoption: An adoption in which birth and adoptive families exchange limited information or maintain indirect contact. Communication may include letters, photographs, emails, or updates shared through an intermediary, such as an adoption agency, attorney, or online portal. In semi-open arrangements, identifying information is usually limited or withheld.
- Identifying information: Information that reveals the identity of birth parents, adoptive parents, or adoptees. Examples include full names, addresses, phone numbers, email addresses, social media profiles, or other contact information.
- Open adoption: An adoption arrangement involving some degree of direct contact between birth and adoptive families. Contact may include sharing identifying information, exchanging letters or messages directly, phone or video calls, or in-person visits. The level of openness varies widely across families and may change over time as the child grows and family relationships develop.

Adoption Terminology

Adoption language matters because it shapes how adoption is understood, discussed, and evaluated within society. Terms such as "placing a child for adoption" or "making an adoption plan" recognize the deliberation, difficulty, and agency involved in birth parents' decisions. By contrast, phrases such as "giving up a baby" or "putting a child up for adoption" can reinforce stigma by suggesting abandonment or irresponsibility.

Using accurate and nonjudgmental language helps present adoption as a complex family formation process rather than a simple act of loss or rejection. It also acknowledges the experiences of all members of the adoption triad: adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents. Shifting toward more respectful terminology is therefore an important part of improving public understanding

of adoption and reducing harmful stereotypes.

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9.9: Demographic Patterns of Fertility and Family Formation

Why Demography Matters for Family Sociology

Family life is shaped not only by cultural meanings and social institutions, but also by demographic patterns. Sociologists study when people have children, how many children they have, and the social conditions under which they become parents. These patterns are influenced by broad social changes, including rising levels of women's education, shifts in paid work, changing reproductive rights, and the availability of family-support policies. They are also shaped by social structures that can reproduce inequality, such as class-based differences in the timing and number of children people have.

Overall Fertility Trends: Fewer Births

The United States population has grown slowly in recent years, reflecting both lower birthrates and shifts in immigration. The nation's birthrate—the number of live births per 1,000 people in a given year—has declined substantially since 2007. In 2024, fertility data showed that women in the United States had an average of about 1.6 children, well below the replacement rate of about 2.1 children per woman (CDC, 2024). The fertility rate in the United States now resembles those in many Western European countries. The decline in birthrate concerns some observers: as the population ages, the economy will rely on new workers—and the taxes they pay—to replace and support retirees.

Childbearing has also shifted to older ages. Fewer than half of all births now occur to mothers ages 15–29, while the average age at first birth rose to 27.5 years in 2023, up from about 26.6 years in 2016. Birth rates have declined sharply among teenagers and women in their early 20s, while increasing among women in their 30s and early 40s. In a notable demographic shift, more babies are now born to women ages 40 and older than to teenagers. Since 2007, the U.S. teen birthrate has fallen by about 69% (CDC, 2025).

In 2023, 40.0% of all U.S. births were to unmarried women, a share that has remained close to 40% for more than a decade and below its 2009 peak of 41%. First births also remain the largest birth-order category: in 2023, roughly two out of every five births were to women having their first child (Osterman et al., 2025).

Surveys show that many adults still ideally want two or more children, but economic constraints, relationship instability, and uncertainty about the future can make it difficult to realize those ideals. Sociological research suggests that the decline in childbearing is shaped by several overlapping factors, including:

- slower population growth and changing immigration patterns;
- financial instability, especially rising housing and childcare costs, student debt, and insecure employment;
- shifting expectations around higher education, careers, marriage, and motherhood;
- increased access to reliable contraception and reproductive technologies;
- changing patterns of dating, sexuality, and intimacy;
- media portrayals of teen pregnancy that may discourage early childbearing; and
- the rapid rise of smartphones and digital media.

Looking more closely at the role of technology, recent research suggests that smartphones and digital media may also contribute to declining fertility, especially among teenagers and young adults. Myers and Hooper (2026) argue that the rapid spread of smartphones, particularly after the introduction of the iPhone, changed how young people spend time, socialize, date, and form relationships. Their study finds that access to the iPhone was associated with lower birth rates among women ages 15–19 and 20–24, and that smartphone adoption may explain a meaningful share of the overall decline in U.S. fertility since 2007 (Myers & Hooper, 2026).

Similarly, Hudson and Moscoso Boedo (2026) suggest that smartphones shifted teen social life away from unstructured, in-person interaction and toward digitally mediated peer networks (Hudson & Moscoso Boedo, 2026). This shift may have reduced opportunities for in-person dating, sexual activity, and unintended pregnancy. Taken together, these studies suggest that declining fertility is shaped not only by economic pressures, contraception, and changing gender roles, but also by transformations in everyday social interaction.

Race and Ethnicity: Fertility and Family Formation

Fertility and family formation in the United States vary across racial and ethnic groups. While overall births have declined, the racial and ethnic composition of births has shifted over time. As the U.S. childbearing population has become more diverse, births today are more racially and ethnically diverse than in the mid-twentieth century (March of Dimes, n.d.). Among all live births from 2021 to 2023:

- Non-Hispanic White mothers accounted for roughly 50–51% of births,
- Hispanic mothers accounted for about one-quarter,
- Non-Hispanic Black mothers accounted for around 14%,
- Asian and Pacific Islander mothers accounted for approximately 6–7%, and
- American Indian/Alaska Native mothers accounted for less than 1% of total births.

Recent federal data show substantial racial and ethnic variation in the share of U.S. births occurring outside of marriage (Osterman et al., 2025). In 2023, the percentage of births to unmarried mothers was approximately:

- Asian: 12%
- Non-Hispanic White: 26.8%
- Hispanic: 54.2%
- Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander: 53%
- American Indian/Alaska Native: 68.7%
- Non-Hispanic Black: 69.3%

Moreover, age at first birth and birth timing differ across racial groups. For example, average ages at first birth were higher for White and Asian women than for Hispanic and Black women in 2023—highlighting persistent demographic differences. These patterns should not be interpreted simply as individual choices or cultural preferences. Rather, they reflect how family formation is shaped by broader economic, educational, residential, health, and structural inequalities.

Taken together, these differences show that fertility and family formation are deeply connected to social location. Race and ethnicity intersect with social class, immigration, neighborhood conditions, access to health care, relationship opportunities, and institutional inequality to shape when, whether, and under what circumstances people have children.

Social Class: Education, Income, and Fertility

In the United States, education is an important indicator of social class, often measured by years of schooling or highest degree completed. Educational attainment shapes family formation in distinct ways, influencing both the timing of childbearing and the number of children people have over the life course. College-educated women are more likely to delay childbearing into their 30s, while women with less education are more likely to have children at younger ages, including during their late teens and early 20s (Livingston, 2015).

Education is also associated with differences in completed family size (Livingston, 2013). Among women ages 40–44, Pew Research Center found that:

- women with less than a high school diploma had about 2.5 children on average;
- women with a high school diploma or some college had around 1.9 children; and
- women with a bachelor's degree or higher had about 1.7 biological children on average.
- Women with higher levels of education were also more likely to be childless.

In sum, women with higher socioeconomic status tend to delay childbearing, have fewer children, and be more likely to remain childfree. These patterns reflect both opportunity and constraint. Higher education can expand women's access to careers, income, autonomy, and long-term planning, but it can also delay partnership and parenting. At the same time, people with fewer economic resources may experience earlier childbearing alongside greater financial insecurity and fewer institutional supports.

Recent survey data indicate that financial concerns are one of the leading reasons Americans report having fewer children than they would like. Approximately 70% agree that raising children is "too expensive," and nearly half cite "insufficient money" as a major factor limiting childbearing (First Five Years Fund, 2025).

Recent survey data indicate that financial concerns are now one of the leading reasons Americans report having fewer children

than they would like. Approximately 70% agree that raising children is "too expensive," and nearly half cite "insufficient money" as a major factor limiting childbearing (First Five Years Fund, 2025). Taken together, these patterns suggest that class-based access to stable employment, housing, health care, paid leave, and affordable childcare profoundly shapes whether, when, and how many children people have.

LGBTQ+ and Family Formation

LGBTQ+ families with children are formed in multiple ways (Young, 2022). Some LGBTQ+ parents have children within heterosexual relationships and come out later in life. Others are partnered with someone of a different sex while identifying as bisexual, queer, or nonheterosexual. Still others are in same-sex relationships and become parents through assisted reproductive technologies, surrogacy, adoption, foster care, or co-parenting arrangements.

Traditional fertility statistics are often built around cisgender, heterosexual couple norms, but LGBTQ+ people are increasingly visible in parenting and family-formation data. A 2024 study found that about 14% of unmarried same-sex couples and nearly one in five married same-sex couples, or 18%, are parenting a child under age 18 in their household (Wilson & Bouton, 2024).

The report also shows that within the LGBTQ+ parent population, bisexual women, lesbian women, and bisexual men make up the largest subgroups. Same-sex couples are also more likely than different-sex couples to adopt or foster children. At the same time, economic and social disparities persist. LGBTQ+ parents are more likely than non-LGBTQ+ parents to live in poverty and may face legal and social challenges related to parental recognition, economic stability, discrimination, and access to family-building pathways.

Nonetheless, demographic data show that LGBTQ+ parenting is not rare or marginal. It is an increasingly visible part of the U.S. family landscape and challenges narrow assumptions that family formation is naturally or exclusively organized around heterosexual marriage, biological reproduction, or cisgender parenthood.

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9.10: Racial Disparities in Maternal Health Outcomes

Exploring Racial Disparities in Maternal Health Outcomes

Racial disparities in maternal health outcomes reveal deep structural inequalities in the United States. In a statement following the death of Dr. Janell Green Smith, a Black certified nurse-midwife and maternal health advocate, the National Black Nurses Association emphasized that "Black women—regardless of education, professional expertise, or proximity to healthcare—remain at disproportionate risk during pregnancy and childbirth due to systemic failures in care" (National Black Nurses Association, 2026).

Maternal Mortality and Maternal Morbidity

Maternal mortality generally refers to deaths related to pregnancy, childbirth, or the postpartum period. The CDC defines a pregnancy-related death as a death that occurs during pregnancy or within one year of the end of pregnancy from a pregnancy complication, a chain of events initiated by pregnancy, or the aggravation of an unrelated condition by the physiological effects of pregnancy (CDC, 2024a). Severe maternal morbidity (SMM) refers to unexpected outcomes of labor and delivery that can result in significant short- or long-term health consequences, including conditions such as severe hemorrhage, sepsis, organ failure, eclampsia, emergency hysterectomy, or other life-threatening complications (CDC, 2024b).

Black women experience pregnancy-related mortality at rates more than three times higher than White women. Recent reporting from KFF shows that in 2023, the pregnancy-related mortality rate was 49.4 deaths per 100,000 live births among Black women, compared with 14.9 among White women, 12.3 among Hispanic women, and 10.7 among Asian women (KFF, 2025). Earlier data also show especially high pregnancy-related mortality rates among American Indian/Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander women (KFF, 2025).

Racial disparities are also evident in severe maternal morbidity. Black women face significantly higher risks of life-threatening pregnancy and childbirth complications than White women, even when deaths do not occur. Research shows that severe maternal morbidity is shaped by the intersection of racial inequality, life-course disadvantage, neighborhood conditions, and socioeconomic marginalization (Hailu et al., 2022). In other words, maternal health disparities are not simply the result of individual medical risk; they are shaped by cumulative exposure to unequal social conditions.

Unequal Care in Maternal Health

These inequities persist across income and education levels, demonstrating that socioeconomic status alone cannot account for racial gaps in maternal morbidity and mortality. Rather than stemming primarily from individual behaviors, these patterns reflect structural racism, including unequal access to high-quality healthcare, differences in hospital quality, and implicit bias within medical systems.

Researchers emphasize that differences in obstetric and postpartum care are central to understanding these outcomes. Maternal health scholar Elizabeth Howell argues that improving maternal health requires standardized, high-quality care before, during, and after pregnancy; preparation for preventable complications; attention to racial bias in care; and stronger support for patients across the postpartum period (Howell, 2018; TEDMED, 2018).

Video: How We Can Improve Maternal Healthcare—Before, During and After Pregnancy

Duration: 15 minutes and 33 seconds.

Elizabeth Howell explains how racial disparities in maternal health are shaped by differences in healthcare quality, patient safety, and postpartum support (TEDMED, 2018).

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

View this YouTube Video online

The death of Dr. Janell Green Smith, a Black midwife and maternal health advocate who died from postpartum complications after giving birth to her first child in South Carolina, brought renewed public attention to these systemic shortcomings. Her death was especially powerful because she had devoted her career to improving maternal health and preventing childbirth-related deaths, particularly among Black women (Georgetown University Center for Children and Families, 2026; National Black Nurses Association, 2026). Sociologically, her story illustrates that professional expertise, education, and proximity to healthcare do not fully protect Black women from the risks produced by unequal systems of care.

Taken together, these patterns show that maternal health is not only a medical issue but also a social justice issue. Reducing racial disparities in maternal mortality and morbidity requires addressing the quality of care within hospitals, expanding access to prenatal and postpartum care, listening to patients' concerns, supporting midwives and doulas, and confronting the broader structural inequalities that shape reproductive health across the life course.

To learn more about the lived experiences behind these disparities, see the PBS episode Black Maternal Health, which explores how racism, unequal treatment, and gaps in maternal healthcare shape pregnancy and childbirth outcomes for Black women and families (PBS, 2024).

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9.11: Conclusion

Concluding Remarks

This chapter examined how people come to experience childlessness, live childfree, or become parents. It explored voluntary and involuntary childlessness, women's reproductive rights, and varied pathways to parenthood, including biological reproduction, in vitro fertilization (IVF), surrogacy, and adoption. These topics show that reproductive lives are shaped not only by personal preference, but also by gender expectations, legal frameworks, medical technologies, economic resources, and social norms.

The chapter also considered demographic patterns of fertility and family formation, including differences by race, ethnicity, social class, education, and sexuality. Finally, it highlighted racial disparities in maternal health outcomes, showing that reproduction and parenthood unfold within unequal systems of healthcare and social support.

Taken together, these themes show that having—or not having—children is never simply a private or biological matter. It is deeply social, shaped by structural inequalities and changing definitions of family. The next chapter turns to the experiences of adults who move into parenthood, exploring how parenting is organized and experienced within contemporary families.

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10: PARENTING IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

10.1: Learning Objectives
10.2: Introduction
10.3: The Functions of Parenting
10.4: Sociological Perspectives on Parenting
10.5: Parenting Practices, Styles, and Ideologies
10.6: Parenting in LGBTQ+ Families
10.7: Working Parents, Childcare, and Family Life
10.8: The Challenges of Parenting in Contemporary Society
10.9: Parenting in the Age of Social Media
10.10: Parenting in the Age of Artificial Intelligence (AI)
10.11: Conclusion

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10.1: Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain the key functions performed by parents and other caregivers
- Apply the major sociological perspectives to parenting
- Compare the major parenting styles
- Evaluate common myths and research findings about children raised by same-sex parents
- Explain how parental employment, childcare quality, affordability, and public policy shape children's development
- Analyze the major pressures facing contemporary parents and caregivers
- Explain how immigration enforcement, parental incarceration, and transnational caregiving can disrupt family relationships
- Evaluate how the rise of social media represents a new frontier in parenting
- Explain how artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping contemporary parenting

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10.2: Introduction

Parenting is both an intimate family relationship and a social institution that shapes children's development, family life, and the continuity of society. Although parents and caregivers make daily decisions about how to raise children, these choices are influenced by cultural expectations, family structure, economic resources, public policies, and broader systems of inequality. This chapter examines the core functions of parenting, major sociological perspectives on parenting and family life, and variations in parenting styles and practices. It also considers how contemporary social, economic, institutional, and technological changes are reshaping the experiences and responsibilities of parents and caregivers.

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10.3: The Functions of Parenting

Exploring the Functions of Parents

Throughout this chapter, the term parents and caregivers refers to adults who assume primary responsibility for raising, caring for, and socializing children. This includes biological, adoptive, foster, and stepparents, as well as grandparents, extended family members, legal guardians, and others who perform sustained caregiving roles.

Parents and caregivers play a central role in children's development and in the continuity of society. Although caregiving practices vary across cultures, historical periods, social classes, and family structures, societies must develop ways to meet children's needs and prepare them to participate in social life. These responsibilities are often centered within families, but they may also be shared with childcare providers, schools, healthcare institutions, religious organizations, and community networks.

The major functions of parenting and caregiving include meeting children's physical and emotional needs, socializing them into society, teaching and modeling behavior, providing protection and guidance, and mediating their relationships with wider institutions. These functions overlap and change as children move through different stages of the life course.

Caregiving and Emotional Support

Parenting and caregiving involve nurturing, protecting, and supporting children as they develop. Because infants and young children are highly dependent on others, caregivers initially provide food, shelter, clothing, supervision, healthcare, physical affection, and emotional security. As children grow, their needs change, but they generally continue to depend on parents and caregivers for material assistance, guidance, encouragement, and a sense of belonging.

Caregiving is therefore both practical and emotional. In addition to meeting children's physical needs, caregivers help them develop trust, regulate emotions, build relationships, and respond to challenges, thereby ensuring the development of the next generation. Through consistent care and interaction, children begin to understand themselves as members of a family and learn what they can expect from relationships with others.

Socialization of Children

Parents and caregivers are primary agents of socialization. Socialization is the process through which individuals learn the norms, values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of their society and social groups. Through everyday interactions, children learn how family members are expected to relate to one another and what their communities consider appropriate or meaningful.

These experiences help shape children's social construction of reality—their understanding of what is normal, natural, and real. Within families, children may learn about gender, race and ethnicity, religion, authority, work, relationships, and family responsibilities.

Primary socialization begins in infancy and is especially influential during early childhood. Families are central to this process, but childcare settings, peers, schools, media, religious institutions, neighborhoods, and digital technologies also contribute. These influences may reinforce family teachings or sometimes conflict with them.

Instruction and Modeling Across the Life Course

Parents and caregivers also serve as teachers and role models. They provide guidance about hygiene, manners, safety, household responsibilities, schoolwork, relationships, and other aspects of everyday life. As children mature, caregivers may also offer advice about dating, employment, marriage, and parenting.

Much of this learning occurs through observation. Children watch how adults communicate, divide household labor, express affection, manage conflict, make decisions, and respond to stress. Parenting therefore involves both deliberate instruction and the modeling of behavior.

These relationships continue to change across the life course. Even after children reach adulthood, parents may remain important

sources of advice, emotional support, financial assistance, and family knowledge.

Protection, Guidance, and Advocacy

Parents and caregivers are responsible for protecting children and making decisions on their behalf. These decisions may involve education, healthcare, childcare, discipline, recreation, and technology use. As children mature, caregivers must balance protection with their growing need for autonomy and independence.

Parents and caregivers also act as intermediaries between children and wider institutions. They communicate with schools, healthcare providers, government agencies, and community organizations, and may advocate for services, accommodations, or fair treatment. Families differ, however, in the time, knowledge, income, language skills, and social connections available to support this work.

Parenting Paradigms

Parents and caregivers generally perform these functions according to a parenting paradigm: a guiding set of beliefs about children's needs, discipline, authority, independence, and the goals of child-rearing. These beliefs may be shaped by cultural traditions, religion, caregivers' own childhood experiences, professional advice, parenting literature, and social media.

Parenting paradigms also reflect broader cultural ideas about what counts as "good parenting." These standards change over time and may privilege some family practices while judging others as deficient. Sociologists therefore examine parenting not simply as a private set of choices, but as a family process shaped by culture, inequality, institutions, and social change.

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10.4: Sociological Perspectives on Parenting

Exploring Sociological Perspectives on Parenting

Parenting can be understood through several major sociological perspectives, each of which highlights a different dimension of family life. Structural Functionalism emphasizes the social functions performed by parents and caregivers; Conflict and Feminist theories focus on inequality, power, and the distribution of caregiving labor; and Symbolic Interactionism examines how family roles and identities are created through everyday interaction.

Structural Functionalism

From a Structural Functionalist perspective, parenting contributes to the stability and continuity of society. Parents and caregivers perform essential functions by providing care, socializing children, regulating behavior, and preparing young people to assume adult roles. Through these processes, children learn the norms, values, skills, and responsibilities needed to participate in social life.

By preparing children to enter institutions such as education, employment, and civic life, families help societies reproduce themselves across generations. Structural Functionalists therefore view parenting as one of the central processes through which social order is maintained.

This perspective can be criticized, however, for sometimes treating dominant family arrangements and parenting norms as necessary or beneficial while paying insufficient attention to inequality, family conflict, and social change.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theorists emphasize that parenting takes place within systems of inequality and unequal power. Parents' resources, opportunities, and experiences vary according to social class, race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, immigration status, disability, and other aspects of social location. Unequal access to safe neighborhoods, high-quality schools, affordable childcare, healthcare, stable employment, and adequate housing shapes the conditions under which families raise children.

Conflict theorists also examine inequality within families. Family members may negotiate competing interests, unequal authority, and uneven divisions of paid and unpaid labor. Social expectations surrounding parenting can reinforce these inequalities. For example, families with higher incomes may be able to enroll their children in better-resourced schools and live in safer neighborhoods, while families with fewer resources often face more limited options.

From this perspective, parenting practices do not occur in a vacuum. Parents' choices are shaped by the opportunities, resources, and constraints created by society.

Feminist Perspectives

Feminist theories examine how parenting is organized through gendered expectations and unequal divisions of caregiving labor. Although parenting responsibilities may be shared, mothers are often held primarily responsible for children's daily care, emotional well-being, education, and behavior. Fathers may receive praise for caregiving that is treated as an ordinary obligation for mothers.

Feminist scholars therefore view parenting as a form of socially necessary labor whose responsibilities, costs, and rewards are distributed unequally. They also examine how workplaces, childcare systems, family policies, and cultural ideals of "good motherhood" influence family life. Limited paid leave, inflexible employment, and expensive childcare may restrict parents' choices while reinforcing the expectation that families—and especially women—should privately absorb the costs of caring for children.

This perspective connects everyday family arrangements to broader questions about gender, work, power, and public policy.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic Interactionists focus on the everyday interactions and shared meanings that shape relationships between parents and children. From this perspective, parenting is an ongoing process of communication, interpretation, and negotiation through which family members construct roles, identities, expectations, and emotional bonds.

Through routine interactions—including praise, discipline, conversation, caregiving, and play—children learn how others perceive them and develop a sense of self. Parents and children also interpret and respond to one another's behavior, meaning that family roles are continually created and adjusted rather than simply fixed in advance.

Symbolic Interactionists may also examine how people learn what it means to be a "good mother," "involved father," "obedient child," or "responsible teenager." These meanings vary across cultures, communities, and historical periods. This perspective therefore shows how the meaning of parenting and family life emerges through everyday social interaction.

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10.5: Parenting Practices, Styles, and Ideologies

Exploring Parenting Practices, Styles, and Ideologies

Parenting practices refer to the everyday ways parents and caregivers guide, support, supervise, and respond to children. These practices can influence children's social, emotional, and academic development, as well as their later relationships. However, parenting does not occur in isolation. Practices are shaped by cultural expectations, family resources, children's needs and temperaments, community conditions, and parents' own experiences.

Psychologist Diana Baumrind originally identified three broad parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive. Eleanor Maccoby and John Martin later expanded this framework by adding a fourth style, commonly called uninvolved or neglectful. These styles are generally distinguished by two dimensions:

- Responsiveness: the degree of warmth, support, and sensitivity shown toward a child.
- Demandingness: the degree to which parents establish expectations, boundaries, supervision, and behavioral standards.

Authoritative Parenting

Authoritative parents combine high responsiveness with clear and reasonable expectations. They show warmth, communicate openly, explain rules, and use guidance and appropriate consequences rather than relying primarily on force or punishment. They remain involved in their children's lives while allowing increasing independence and opportunities to learn from mistakes.

In many U.S. studies, authoritative parenting is associated with stronger social skills, emotional well-being, self-regulation, and academic performance. These associations do not mean that parenting style alone determines children's outcomes. Children's temperaments, family relationships, economic resources, schools, neighborhoods, and wider cultural contexts also matter.

Authoritarian Parenting

Authoritarian parents are high in demandingness but relatively low in responsiveness. They emphasize obedience, order and respect for authority and may expect children to follow rules without extensive explanation or negotiation. These households are often highly structured, with adults clearly positioned as being in charge.

Children raised in authoritarian households may become obedient and perform reasonably well in structured settings, but some research links this style to lower self-esteem, weaker social skills, and greater emotional distress when compared with authoritative parenting.

Authoritarian parenting is sometimes associated with corporal punishment, such as spanking, because of its emphasis on obedience and compliance. However, the two are not identical. Not all authoritarian parents use physical discipline and corporal punishment also varies across cultural, regional, religious, and historical contexts. Its meaning and effects may therefore differ among families and communities.

Permissive Parenting

Permissive, or indulgent, parents are high in responsiveness but low in demandingness. They are generally warm and accepting but establish relatively few rules, boundaries, or consistent consequences. They may avoid confrontation or relate to their children more as friends than as authority figures.

Children raised in permissive households may have relatively strong self-esteem and social confidence, but some studies associate this style with difficulty regulating behavior, following rules, and managing frustration. Outcomes vary depending on the child, the family environment, and the broader social context.

Uninvolved Parenting

Uninvolved parenting is characterized by low responsiveness and low demandingness. Parents may provide limited guidance, supervision, or emotional support and may have little involvement in their children's daily lives. In its most severe form, this pattern may involve neglect.

Research generally associates uninvolved parenting with less favorable social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes. However, apparent disengagement should not automatically be interpreted as indifference. Long work hours, poverty, illness, family disruption, mental-health challenges, and limited social support may constrain the care and supervision that adults can provide. A sociological perspective therefore distinguishes between a parenting orientation and the structural circumstances that restrict caregiving capacity.

Parenting Styles and Outcomes for Children

Research conducted in the United States has generally found that authoritative parenting is associated with the most consistently positive outcomes, including stronger social competence, self-regulation, and academic performance. Uninvolved parenting is most consistently associated with negative outcomes. Authoritarian and permissive parenting tend to produce more mixed results.

Parental responsiveness is often associated with social competence, emotional well-being, and self-esteem, while appropriate demandingness is associated with behavioral regulation and academic achievement. A combination of warmth, supervision, and age-appropriate expectations appears to support children's development.

These findings should not be interpreted as evidence that parenting style directly or independently causes particular outcomes. Parents and children influence one another, and parenting practices may change in response to a child's personality, behavior, age, or needs. Family income, parental stress, neighborhood conditions, school quality, and supportive relationships also shape development.

Parent–child relationships should also change across the life course. Young children generally require closer supervision, while adolescents need increasing opportunities to make decisions, take manageable risks, and develop independence. When parents do not adjust their expectations as children mature, conflict may increase and the quality of the relationship may decline.

Culture and the Limits of Parenting-Style Categories

Although Baumrind's framework is widely used, researchers caution against assuming that authoritative parenting is universally optimal or that the same behaviors carry identical meanings in every culture. Much of the original research was conducted within Western, particularly European American, families and reflects cultural values that emphasize independence, verbal negotiation, and democratic decision-making.

In some cultural settings, firm parental control may be understood as an expression of care, training, and commitment rather than emotional distance. Children's responses to parental authority therefore depend partly on the meanings attached to that behavior within their families and communities.

Some scholars use the term traditional parenting to describe families that combine high expectations and respect for authority with warmth, responsiveness, and strong family solidarity. These parents may expect children to respect elders and follow cultural traditions without extensive negotiation, yet remain emotionally close and highly involved.

This pattern has been identified in some Asian American, Latino American, immigrant, and other families whose practices do not fit neatly into Baumrind's original categories. It differs from authoritarian parenting because authority is accompanied by warmth and close family relationships. These findings demonstrate that parenting styles must be interpreted within their cultural and social contexts rather than ranked according to a single universal standard.

Contemporary Parenting Practices

Researchers and commentators have also identified practices such as overindulgent and helicopter parenting. These approaches are not necessarily equivalent to Baumrind's four styles. Instead, they describe patterns that have received particular attention in contemporary discussions of parenting, children's independence, and parental responsibility.

Overindulgent Parenting

Overindulgent parenting involves providing children with more material goods, experiences, assistance, privileges, or freedom than is appropriate for their age or developmental needs. Parents may overindulge children out of affection, guilt, a desire to compensate for their own childhood experiences, or concern that children might otherwise feel deprived.

Overindulgence may include:

- providing excessive material goods or experiences;
- removing age-appropriate responsibilities;
- repeatedly protecting children from the consequences of their decisions; or
- granting privileges and autonomy without appropriate boundaries.

Some research links overindulgence with entitlement, self-centeredness, weak coping skills, and difficulty tolerating frustration. The central concern is not generosity itself, but whether children have opportunities to develop responsibility, patience, decision-making skills, and independence.

Helicopter Parenting

Helicopter parenting refers to unusually close monitoring and intervention in a child's activities, choices, challenges, and achievements. The metaphor of "hovering" captures the tendency of some caregivers to remain continuously involved and to intervene quickly when difficulties arise.

Digital technology can reinforce this pattern by allowing parents to track children's locations, communicate constantly, monitor school performance, and intervene in conflicts from a distance. University of Georgia professor Richard Mullendore described the cell phone as "the world's longest umbilical cord," emphasizing how technology can extend parental oversight well into adolescence and adulthood.

Research has associated intensive parental intervention with anxiety, reduced confidence, limited coping skills, and difficulty making independent decisions. However, parents may engage in close supervision because they perceive their children's schools, neighborhoods, or social environments as unsafe. Helicopter parenting should therefore be understood in relation to broader cultural expectations that define good parents as constantly attentive and responsible for preventing nearly every risk.



Figure 10.5.1: Helicopter parents do not literally hover above their children, but the term captures their tendency toward close monitoring, constant oversight, and frequent intervention (Photo Source: Army Staff Sgt. Roberto Di Giovine).

Parenting Ideologies

Parenting styles describe patterns of interaction between parents and children. Parenting ideologies, by contrast, are broader cultural beliefs about what parents—particularly mothers—should do and what society considers "good parenting."

Intensive Mothering

Sociologist Sharon Hays (1996) introduced the concept of intensive mothering to describe a dominant U.S. ideology that defines good motherhood as child-centered, emotionally absorbing, time-consuming, and financially expensive (Hays, 1996). According to this ideal, mothers should devote substantial attention, energy, and resources to protecting children and promoting their development.

Intensive mothering is not a distinct parenting style. Instead, it establishes cultural expectations that may influence several styles and practices. Its emphasis on warmth, guidance, and developmental enrichment may overlap with authoritative parenting. However, pressure to maximize children's success and protect them from harm may also contribute to overindulgent or helicopter parenting.

Although intensive mothering is most strongly associated with middle-class ideals, mothers across social groups may be judged according to its standards even when they lack the time, income, flexible employment, or institutional support needed to meet them. Fathers are increasingly expected to be involved parents, but mothers often remain more heavily judged for children's behavior and well-being.

From a sociology of the family perspective, intensive mothering demonstrates that parenting is not simply a personal choice. Cultural expectations, gender norms, labor-market conditions, family policies, and unequal resources shape how parents understand their responsibilities and how others evaluate their behavior.

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10.6: Parenting in LGBTQ+ Families

Exploring Parenting in LGBTQ+ Families

Families headed by LGBTQ+ parents take many forms, including married and unmarried couples, single parents, adoptive and foster families, blended families, and families formed through assisted reproduction. Despite this diversity, public debates have often focused on unsupported claims about children's development in same-sex-parent families.

Common Myths and Research Evidence

Persistent myths claim that children raised by same-sex parents will experience confusion about their gender identity or gender roles, are more likely to become gay or lesbian, or will develop more psychological, behavioral, or social problems than children raised by different-sex parents. Other harmful stereotypes suggest that lesbian mothers and gay fathers are less capable, less responsible, or more likely to expose children to harm. These claims reflect longstanding prejudice toward LGBTQ+ people rather than credible evidence about parenting or child development.

A substantial body of sociological and psychological research has challenged these myths. Overall, studies find that children raised by same-sex parents fare as well as children raised by different-sex parents across measures of psychological well-being, behavioral adjustment, social development, and academic achievement. Research consistently shows that the quality of family relationships—including parental warmth, stability, communication, and support—is a stronger predictor of children's well-being than parents' sexual orientation.

Psychologist Charlotte Patterson conducted some of the earliest and most influential research challenging negative assumptions about same-sex parenting. Her work examined children's behavioral adjustment, self-concepts, social relationships, and gender development in lesbian- and gay-parent families and found no meaningful disadvantages compared with children raised by heterosexual parents. Patterson's research helped establish that children's development is shaped more by the quality of caregiving and family relationships than by whether parents are heterosexual, lesbian, gay, or bisexual.



Figure 10.6.1: A same-sex couple and their children at San Francisco Pride in 2008. (CC BY-SA; Caitlin Childs)

Both the myths surrounding LGBTQ+ parents and the research challenging them have played an important role in family court proceedings. Historically, stereotypes portraying lesbian mothers as unfit or gay fathers as irresponsible were used in custody disputes to justify restrictive or punitive decisions. In response, empirical research documenting the competence of LGBTQ+ parents and the well-being of their children became increasingly influential in legal settings.

This scholarship has helped shift attention toward evidence-based assessments of parenting rather than assumptions rooted in prejudice. Researchers such as Patterson have also served as expert witnesses in custody and related legal cases. Nevertheless, LGBTQ+ families remain affected by broader systems of heterosexism and cissexism, which can shape laws, public policies, court decisions, schools, healthcare systems, and everyday family experiences.

From a sociology of the family perspective, same-sex parenting shows that family well-being is not determined by one ideal family form. Instead, children's outcomes are shaped by caregiving quality, emotional security, economic resources, legal recognition, social support, and freedom from stigma and discrimination.

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10.7: Working Parents, Childcare, and Family Life

Working Parents, Childcare, and Family Life

Parents—especially mothers—are far more likely to participate in paid employment than they were several decades ago. This is true among married and unmarried women and among women both with and without children. Although remote and hybrid work have changed where some paid labor takes place, families still face the ongoing challenge of balancing employment with childcare. These shifts have intensified debates about who should care for children, how childcare affects development, and how families should divide caregiving responsibilities.

Much of this debate has been shaped by traditional gender norms, particularly the belief that young children need a parent—usually the mother—at home full-time until they begin school and available after school thereafter. Significantly, concerns about employment and child well-being have historically focused far more on mothers' paid work than on fathers' paid work. This reflects broader cultural expectations about gender, caregiving, and family roles.

Early research often compared children attending childcare with children cared for at home by their mothers, with particular attention to emotional attachment. In some studies, researchers observed how children responded when their mothers left and later returned to a laboratory room. Children in childcare sometimes appeared less distressed by their mothers' departure and less expressive upon reunion, while children cared for at home tended to show greater distress when their mothers left and more visible relief when they returned. Some scholars interpreted these patterns as evidence that children in childcare were less securely attached to their mothers (Schwartz, 1983).

Other researchers argued that this interpretation was too simplistic. They suggested that children in childcare may have appeared calmer because they were more accustomed to the routine of daily separation and reunion. From this perspective, their behavior reflected adaptation, growing independence, and self-confidence rather than weaker attachment (Coontz, 1997).

Longitudinal research has produced a more nuanced picture of how childcare relates to children's development. Some influential findings come from research funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (Rabin, 2008). This research found that children in childcare often showed somewhat stronger cognitive outcomes, particularly in reading and mathematics, than children cared for exclusively at home. At the same time, they were sometimes slightly more likely to display aggressive behavior, although these differences generally remained within the normal range of childhood behavior. Taken together, these findings suggest that the effects of childcare are mixed and cannot be reduced to a simple judgment that it is either beneficial or harmful.

This body of research points to two especially important conclusions. First, the quality of parenting, along with factors such as parental education and family income, has a much greater influence on children's cognitive and social development than whether they attend childcare. Second, when childcare produces benefits, those benefits are most evident in high-quality settings, while low-quality care can be harmful.



Figure 10.7.1: A teacher reads with young children in a classroom setting. High-quality childcare can support children's learning, social interaction, and emotional development, while also helping families balance caregiving and paid work. © Thinkstock.

This distinction is especially important in the United States, where childcare is often expensive and varies widely in quality. Because many families cannot afford the highest-quality options, access remains deeply unequal. Compared with many other Western democracies, the United States provides relatively limited public support for affordable childcare. In a society where many families depend on dual parental employment and where high-quality childcare can promote healthy development, expanding access to affordable, reliable, and high-quality care remains a major social policy issue.

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10.8: The Challenges of Parenting in Contemporary Society

Exploring the Challenges of Parenting in Contemporary Society

Parenting is often described as deeply meaningful, but it can also be stressful, expensive, and shaped by pressures beyond the control of individual families. Parents and caregivers must respond not only to children's needs, but also to work schedules, housing costs, childcare systems, schools, healthcare access, family policies, immigration laws, criminal justice institutions, and changing cultural expectations.

Parenting Under Pressure: Stress and Well-Being

A recent national advisory from the U.S. Surgeon General's report "Parents Under Pressure" found that parents today experience significantly higher levels of stress than other adults, highlighting parental stress as a growing public health concern (Office of the Surgeon General, 2024). According to 2023 data cited in the advisory, about one-third of parents (33%) reported high levels of stress in the past month compared with only 20% of non-parents, and nearly half of parents (48%) said that most days their stress feels completely overwhelming—almost double the rate among other adults. This gap illustrates how contemporary parenting involves stressors above and beyond those faced by the general adult population.

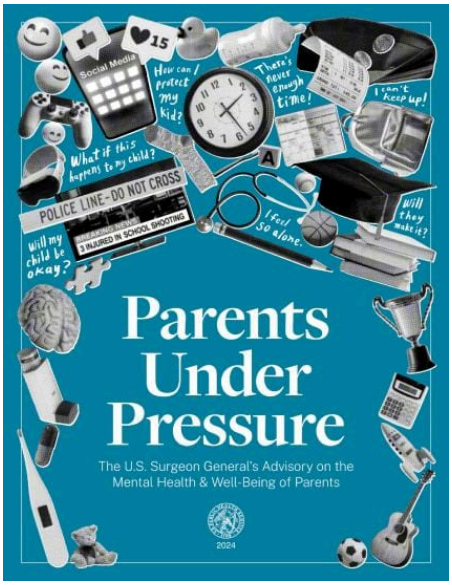


Figure 10.8.1: Cover of Parents Under Pressure: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Mental Health and Well-Being of Parents. (Public domain; Office of the U.S. Surgeon General via HHS)

Parents and caregivers also experience unique demands related to child-rearing that contribute to elevated stress levels. These include financial strain, economic instability, and poverty; intense time pressures; worries about children's health and safety; social isolation; and newer stressors linked to technology, social media, cultural expectations, and concerns about children's futures. Together, these overlapping pressures help explain why parenting today is often described as both emotionally meaningful and chronically stressful.

Finally, the advisory highlights that many children are cared for by relatives or non-parent caregivers when parents cannot assume full responsibility. Approximately 2.4 million children in the U.S. are being raised by grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends without their biological parents in the home. These caregivers play a critical safety-net role but often face barriers navigating service systems and securing the supports they need, despite the importance of their caregiving work.

While the Surgeon General's (2024) advisory highlights widespread stress among parents, sociological research shows that the emotional impacts of parenting are not experienced uniformly across social groups. Drawing on General Social Survey data, Augustine and Brantley (2023) find meaningful variation by race and gender in how parenting relates to self-reported happiness (Augustine & Brantley, 2023). Their analysis reveals that White mothers tend to report lower happiness than their

non-parent peers, whereas no such happiness gap exists between Black mothers and non-parenting Black women. Among men, White fathers report similar happiness levels as non-parents, but Black fathers are significantly more likely to say they feel "very happy" compared to non-parenting Black men. The authors suggest that cultural expectations, community support, and differing models of parenting help explain these patterns. For example, Black mothers often report stronger community support and view themselves as role models, while many Black fathers embrace a parenting model centered on relationships. These findings challenge deficit narratives often surrounding Black families.

Family Structure, Support, and Parental Stress

Family structure can intensify or reduce parenting stress because different household arrangements shape caregiving roles, support networks, and access to resources (Office of the Surgeon General, 2024). Single-parent households, for example, may experience heightened stress due to sole caregiving responsibilities, financial hardship, and reduced practical support. LGBTQ+ parent families may face discrimination or social stigma, which can add another layer of stress. In contrast, multigenerational households can sometimes buffer stress by distributing childcare responsibilities and providing emotional, social, and practical support.

Family disruption can further increase stress for both caregivers and children. Experiences such as illness, divorce, separation, parental incarceration, child welfare involvement, intimate partner violence, or immigration-related family separation can create instability in daily routines, caregiving arrangements, housing, income, and emotional security. For example, the Surgeon General's advisory notes that newly divorced individuals report significantly higher perceived stress than both the general population and people who have been divorced for longer periods (Office of the Surgeon General, 2024).

The Rising Cost of Raising Children and Paying for Childcare

Raising children in the United States requires substantial financial resources, shaping how parents plan their families, participate in paid work, and manage household budgets. One 2025 analysis estimated that two working adults would need an additional $27,743 per year, on average, to support one child under age five. This estimate includes additional spending on housing, food, transportation, healthcare, miscellaneous necessities, and childcare, although costs vary considerably by state. In California, the estimated annual cost was substantially higher, at $35,651 (DeJohn, 2025).

Childcare constitutes one of the largest and most immediate expenses facing families with young children. Pew Research Center reported that the median cost of paid care for one child ranged from 8.0% to 19.3% of a county's median household income, depending on the child's age, type of care, and county size. Center-based infant care was especially expensive, reaching 19.3% of median household income in the largest counties. Lower-income families may spend an even greater share of their income on care (Leppert, 2024).

Child Care Aware of America estimated that the national average price of childcare was $13,128 in 2024. This represented approximately 10% of the median income of married couples with children and 35% of the median income of single-parent families. Between 2020 and 2024, childcare prices increased by 29%, compared with a 22% increase in overall consumer prices (Child Care Aware of America, 2025). More recent data indicate that the national average rose slightly again, to $13,184 in 2025.

These costs are particularly significant because the United States does not provide a national system of universally available childcare or guaranteed paid parental leave comparable to those offered in many other affluent countries. As a result, much of the financial and practical responsibility for caring for young children falls on individual families, with consequences for parents' employment, economic security, and stress levels (Adema et al., 2023).

The cost of childcare has consequently become an important political and social-policy issue. In New York City, Mayor Zohran Mamdani campaigned on establishing free childcare for children from six weeks through age five. In 2026, the city and New York State began taking steps toward that broader goal by announcing publicly funded childcare for two-year-olds. The initial phase will create 2,000 free 2-K places in selected communities, with plans to expand the program and strengthen existing services for three- and four-year-olds. The initiative illustrates how governments may respond to childcare costs by treating early care as a public responsibility rather than solely a private family expense.

From a sociological perspective, the cost of raising children is not simply a matter of individual budgeting. It reflects broader decisions about wages, employment, gender, public investment, and the extent to which society collectively supports caregiving. Because families differ greatly in income and access to assistance, rising childcare costs can deepen existing inequalities while limiting parents' choices about work and family life.

State Institutions, Family Separation, and Caregiving Disruption

Some of the most serious challenges facing families are created or intensified by state institutions. Immigration enforcement, detention, deportation, incarceration, and child welfare involvement can reorganize caregiving, remove parents from households, and shift responsibilities to grandparents, relatives, foster caregivers, or other support networks. These examples show that parenting is not only shaped inside families. It is also shaped by laws, courts, police, prisons, immigration agencies, schools, and social-service systems.

Immigration Enforcement, Family Separation, and Parental Stress

Immigration enforcement can disrupt family life in ways that heighten stress for both parents and children. Actions by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)—including workplace raids, detention, and deportation—can separate children from one or both parents with little warning. Even when families remain physically together, fear of enforcement can generate chronic anxiety, discourage people from accessing healthcare, schools, and social services, and undermine parents' sense of security and stability. These experiences demonstrate how state institutions and immigration policies can reshape family structures, caregiving arrangements, and everyday life, particularly within immigrant and mixed-status families.



Figure 10.8.2: Liam Conejo Ramos detained by ICE in Minnesota in January 2026 (photo credited Ali Daniels via The Associated Press)

In their Contexts article "Detention, Disappearance, and the Politics of Family," sociologists Amina Zarrugh and Luis A. Romero (2019) examine immigrant detention alongside forced disappearance to show how state removal affects not only those who are detained but also the families and social networks left behind (Zarrugh & Romero, 2019). Families may struggle to locate detained relatives, obtain information, maintain contact, and manage the emotional and practical consequences of a sudden absence. From this perspective, detention operates beyond the walls of detention facilities: its effects extend into households and communities, disrupting relationships, caregiving, income, and family stability.

The 2025 episode of The Daily titled "Family Separation 2.0" illustrates these dynamics through one family's experience of contemporary U.S. immigration enforcement (The New York Times, 2025). Producer Jessica Cheung tells the story of a longtime U.S. resident who was detained and targeted for deportation through the perspective of his daughter. The episode demonstrates how detention and deportation can affect established families whose members have built lives, careers, and relationships in the United States, making immigration enforcement a deeply personal family experience as well as a political and legal process.

Parental Incarceration, Family Disruption, and Inequality

Sociologist Anna Haskell, in an ASA interview titled "Shackling Children's Futures," illustrates how parental incarceration represents one of the most consequential yet often overlooked forms of family disruption. When a parent is incarcerated, children may be placed with grandparents, other relatives, or foster caregivers, while remaining caregivers—most often mothers

or extended kin—take on increased financial and emotional responsibilities.

Video: Shackling Children's Futures

Duration: 4 minutes and 7 seconds. Haskins finds that parental incarceration is associated with poorer educational outcomes for children, contributing to long-term disadvantage. Addressing these harms, she argues, requires policy approaches that recognize the interconnected roles of the criminal justice system, schools, and families (American Sociological Association, 2020).

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

View this YouTube Video online

A growing body of research links parental incarceration to adverse educational, behavioral, and health outcomes for children (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2013). National estimates suggest that millions of U.S. children have experienced a parent behind bars, exposing many to instability, stigma, and economic strain. Studies consistently link parental incarceration to elevated risks of behavioral problems, emotional distress, and weakened school engagement. Scholars also emphasize that the impact is stratified by race and social class: children in heavily policed and economically marginalized communities are disproportionately exposed to parental imprisonment, thereby reproducing broader patterns of inequality across generations.

Importantly, researchers note that the consequences are not inevitable but are mediated by caregiving stability, continued parent–child contact, and access to supportive school and community resources. Policy discussions increasingly frame parental incarceration as a form of "hidden inequality" within family life—one that blurs the boundaries between criminal justice policy and family well-being. From a sociological perspective, the evidence underscores that mass incarceration functions not only as an individual punishment but also as a structural force shaping children's life chances and the reproduction of social inequality.

Transnational Parenting and "Satellite Babies"

Another challenge facing some contemporary families is parenting across national borders. Sociologists have documented the experiences of Chinese American "satellite babies"—children born in the United States to Chinese immigrant parents who are sent to China during infancy to be cared for by grandparents or other extended family members. After several years, the children generally return to the United States to live with their parents and begin school.

These arrangements emerge from a combination of economic pressures, limited access to affordable childcare, demanding work schedules, immigration circumstances, and cultural traditions of intergenerational caregiving. Parents may understand the decision as a temporary strategy that allows them to establish financial stability in the United States while ensuring that their children receive attentive care from trusted relatives. Rather than reflecting a lack of parental commitment, satellite parenting often illustrates the difficult trade-offs immigrant families make as they pursue long-term security and opportunity (Ng, 2019; Wang, 2018).

Transnational caregiving arrangements can nevertheless create distinctive emotional, cultural, and developmental challenges for both parents and children. When satellite children return to the United States during their preschool or early school years, they must adjust to a different language, education system, culture, and caregiving environment. Some are also separated from the grandparents who have served as their primary attachment figures. Their biological parents, meanwhile, may experience guilt, uncertainty, and a new learning process as they establish daily routines and rebuild relationships with children from whom they have lived apart.

The experiences of satellite families demonstrate how parenting is shaped by forces extending far beyond the household. Global migration, labor markets, childcare systems, immigration policies, extended-family networks, and cultural expectations all influence who provides care and where that care takes place. Transnational parenting therefore challenges the assumption that families must live together in one household or even one country to maintain caregiving responsibilities and emotional ties.

Unequal Childhoods Within the Same Family

Inequality does not exist only between families; it can also develop among children raised within the same household. In The Pecking Order, sociologist Dalton Conley argues that siblings may experience substantially different childhoods even when they share the same parents and family home (Conley, 2004). Drawing on survey and interview data, he demonstrates that siblings may receive different amounts of parental attention, financial support, encouragement, expectations, and access to opportunities. Together, these differences can create a family "pecking order" that shapes children's education, health, income, and experiences later in adulthood.

Differences among siblings may be influenced by birth order, gender, personality, family size, and the timing of significant events such as divorce, illness, unemployment, or financial hardship. For example, a child who is very young during a period of economic instability or intense parental stress may grow up with fewer resources than a sibling whose early childhood occurred during a more secure period. Parents' circumstances, parenting practices, and relationships with individual children may also change over time.

Conley's research therefore challenges the assumption that siblings raised by the same parents necessarily grow up under the same conditions. Families are dynamic social environments and each child occupies a somewhat different position within them. As a result, unequal life chances can emerge not only between households but also among siblings within the same family.

Thinking Sociologically: Adolescents, Public Space, and Social Control

In "Can We Just Let Teens Exist in Public?" Beck (Beck, 2026) argues that the growing use of curfews, chaperone requirements, and restrictions on unaccompanied minors reflects a broader shift toward intensive adult supervision. Although such policies are often introduced in response to disruptive behavior, they may restrict all adolescents because of the actions of a relatively small number.

Teenagers are increasingly excluded from malls, parks, restaurants, movie theaters, and other public or semi-public spaces unless accompanied by an adult. This raises an important sociological question: How can young people develop judgment, independence, and social responsibility when they have few opportunities to practice these skills?

These policies also reflect a shift from communal supervision toward the expectation that individual parents must constantly monitor their own children. Adolescents may consequently be treated less as developing members of a community and more as potential risks requiring surveillance and control.

Restrictions on public space may be especially significant at a time when adolescents have fewer opportunities to socialize informally outside school, organized activities, and digital platforms. From a sociology of the family perspective, these policies reveal tensions between protection and autonomy, parental and community responsibility, and young people's gradual transition toward adulthood.

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10.9: Parenting in the Age of Social Media

Exploring Parenting in the Digital Age

Digital media has become deeply woven into childhood, adolescence, and family life. Smartphones, tablets, social media platforms, video-sharing services, and messaging apps shape how young people communicate, form friendships, encounter information, express their identities, and seek entertainment. For many children and adolescents, online spaces provide opportunities for creativity, connection, community, and support. This can be especially important for young people who feel isolated or marginalized offline, including LGBTQ+ youth, disabled youth, immigrant youth, and others seeking information or community. At the same time, parents, researchers, educators, health professionals, and policymakers have raised concerns about how intensive digital-media use may affect sleep, mental health, body image, attention, learning, and face-to-face relationships.

In a recent podcast, Dr. Sanjay Gupta reported that 40% of children have their own tablet by age two and 60% by age four, illustrating how early digital media becomes embedded in many children's lives (Gupta, 2026). Parents are often expected to manage technology use within the home, yet many digital risks are also built into platforms designed to capture attention, collect data, and maximize engagement. Parenting in the digital age therefore involves more than setting household rules. It also raises broader sociological questions about corporate responsibility, government regulation, unequal access to resources, and who should bear responsibility for protecting young people online.

Digital access and supervision are also unequal. Families differ in their access to reliable internet, updated devices, private space for schoolwork, digital-literacy skills, parental-control tools, and adult time to monitor children's online activity. Digital parenting not simply as a matter of individual household choice, but as part of a wider system involving families, schools, corporations, markets, and the state.

Social Media, Smartphones, and Youth Well-Being

Research has identified associations between intensive social media use and several dimensions of adolescent well-being, although the relationships are complex and do not affect all young people in the same way. Psychologist Jean Twenge is among the most prominent researchers arguing that the rapid growth of smartphones and social media has coincided with declining adolescent well-being. Her work links heavy digital-media use with outcomes such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, reduced sleep, and less face-to-face social interaction (Twenge, 2017). Researchers continue to debate the size, direction, and causes of these effects, especially because digital-media use includes many different activities, from passive scrolling to creative expression, schoolwork, private messaging, and participation in supportive communities.

Several possible pathways may help explain these associations. Late-night device use, notifications, and emotionally stimulating content can interfere with sleep, which is important for mood regulation and mental health. Highly edited and carefully curated images may also encourage social comparison and contribute to body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, or disordered eating. Young people may encounter cyberbullying, harassment, misinformation, or content involving self-harm, suicide, violence, and other risky behaviors.

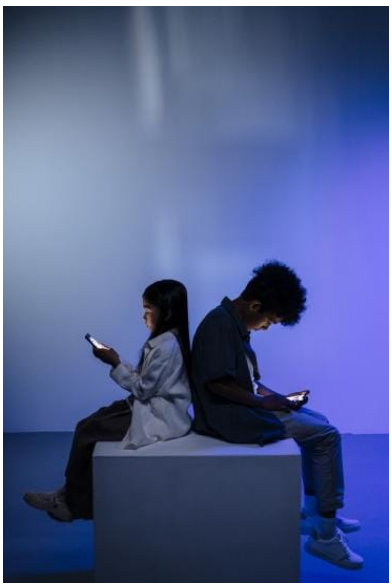


Figure 10.9.1: Two children use smartphones while sitting back-to-back, illustrating how digital media can connect young people to online worlds while raising questions about attention, co-presence, and face-to-face interaction (Pexels License; Ron Lach via Pexels).

Platform features such as infinite scrolling, autoplay, notifications, and algorithmic recommendations are designed to sustain attention and may encourage habitual or compulsive use. Time spent online can also displace activities that generally support well-being, including sleep, physical activity, schoolwork, and in-person relationships. Nevertheless, digital media does not affect every young person in the same way. Outcomes vary according to the amount and type of use, the content encountered, a young person's existing vulnerabilities, and the strength of family, peer, school, and community support.

Parental Strategies for Managing Digital Media

Parents use a variety of strategies to help children develop healthier relationships with technology. These may include delaying access to smartphones or social media, using parental controls, establishing time limits, discussing online risks, and creating device-free spaces and routines. Sociologists and family researchers sometimes describe these efforts as forms of parental mediation: the ways parents guide, restrict, monitor, or discuss children's media use. Parents may also encourage children to think critically about the content they encounter rather than relying only on surveillance and restriction.

In "10 Rules for Raising Kids in a High-Tech World", Twenge recommends keeping electronic devices out of bedrooms overnight, delaying social media until age 16 or later, beginning with a basic phone rather than a smartphone, creating phone-free family spaces, and restricting phone use during the school day (Twenge, 2025). She also emphasizes the importance of preserving opportunities for independence, outdoor activity, sleep, and face-to-face interaction. These recommendations treat digital boundaries as part of a broader approach to child development rather than simply as punishment or control.

Household rules can be difficult to enforce consistently, however, particularly when schools, peer groups, entertainment, and everyday communication all depend heavily on digital technology. Parents may also lack the time, technological knowledge, or financial resources needed to monitor multiple devices and platforms. Moreover, children can often bypass age declarations and parental-control systems. These challenges illustrate why digital safety cannot reasonably be treated as the responsibility of individual parents alone.

Digital Governance and the Regulation of Social Media

Responses to concerns about social media and youth mental health are emerging not only within families but also through courts, legislation, and public policy. A growing wave of lawsuits argues that major technology companies designed platform features to encourage prolonged and compulsive use while failing to adequately protect young users. Plaintiffs have focused on features such as infinite scrolling, autoplay, notifications, and algorithmic recommendations, claiming that companies including Meta, YouTube, TikTok, and Snap prioritized engagement and profit over children's well-being.

These cases have sometimes been compared with earlier litigation against tobacco companies because they raise similar

questions about whether corporations understood the risks associated with their products while continuing to market them to young people. In early 2026, TikTok and Snap settled a closely watched case before trial, while a California jury subsequently found Meta and YouTube negligent for platform designs that contributed to a young user's compulsive social media use and psychological harm. The verdict marked an important development because it treated the design of social media platforms—not simply the content posted by users—as a potential source of corporate liability.

Future legal decisions could lead to stronger safety standards, warning labels, age-appropriate design rules, and limits on collecting minors' data. These cases shift attention away from parental supervision alone and toward the platform designs and business models shaping young people's behavior.

Governments are also regulating youth access more directly. Australia's 2024 legislation requires major platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok, and YouTube, to prevent users under 16 from holding accounts. The restrictions took effect in December 2025, with responsibility placed on technology companies rather than families.

Early implementation has been uneven (Kim, 2026). Platforms have removed many underage accounts, but some adolescents continue to bypass restrictions or move to other services. Even so, Australia's policy has become an international model for treating digital safety as a shared responsibility among families, corporations, and governments. It also raises questions about young people's autonomy, privacy, and access to information.

The Australian policy is more accurately described as a minimum age for holding social media accounts than as a complete ban on accessing all online content. Nevertheless, it represents an important change in how responsibility for digital safety is distributed. Rather than expecting individual families to manage powerful global platforms on their own, the policy places greater responsibility on corporations and regulatory institutions.

Social media and smartphones have already changed how parents supervise children's communication, safety, and social development. Artificial intelligence introduces a newer set of challenges because young people may now interact not only with peers and platforms, but also with automated systems that can simulate conversation, generate images, recommend content, and provide advice. The next section examines how AI is creating new opportunities and risks for parenting and family life.

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10.10: Parenting in the Age of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Exploring Parenting in the Age of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Artificial intelligence (AI) is creating new opportunities for learning, creativity, and communication, but it is also generating new forms of risk for children, adolescents, and families. Unlike earlier forms of digital media, AI tools can generate images, simulate conversation, provide advice, produce children's content, and respond to users in ways that may feel personal or emotionally meaningful. Concerns include nonconsensual AI-generated images, emotional dependence on chatbots, inadequate responses during mental health crises, and the spread of low-quality automated content designed to attract children's attention. Together, these developments make AI an emerging challenge for contemporary parenting.

AI as a Family Resource

Artificial intelligence may provide useful support for families. Parents and children may use AI tools for tutoring, translation, accessibility assistance, scheduling, creative projects, or locating information and services. These tools may be especially helpful for multilingual households, students needing homework support, and families navigating complex institutions. However, access to the benefits of AI is unequal. Families with more income, stronger digital literacy, and access to safer paid tools may be better positioned to evaluate AI-generated information and avoid harmful or misleading content.

Nonconsensual AI-Generated Sexual Images

One major concern involves the use of generative AI to create nonconsensual sexualized images of real people, including minors. This issue received widespread attention after users employed image-generation and editing features connected to xAI's Grok chatbot to alter photographs of women and children without their consent (Conger & Dearden, 2026). Such cases demonstrate how AI tools can intensify existing forms of sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse by making fabricated images easier to create and distribute.

These harms are not limited to whether an image is technically "real." AI-generated sexual images can still damage reputations, violate privacy, produce fear and humiliation, and remain difficult to remove once they circulate online. Parents and schools must therefore address not only traditional online safety but also the possibility that young people may be targeted through synthetic media. Schools may also need policies for responding to AI-generated harassment, since these harms can circulate among peers even when they are created outside school.

AI Chatbots and Emotional Vulnerability

Researchers and policymakers are also examining how conversational AI may affect young people experiencing loneliness, emotional distress, or suicidal thoughts. Causal relationships remain difficult to establish, and chatbot use does not affect every user in the same way. Nevertheless, investigative reporting and podcasts have highlighted cases in which vulnerable adolescents developed intense emotional attachments to AI companions (Center for Humane Technology, 2025; The New York Times, 2025).

Chatbots may appear supportive because they respond continuously, imitate empathy, and adapt their language to the user. However, they do not possess human understanding, professional judgment, or accountability. During a mental health crisis, an AI system may fail to recognize danger, reinforce harmful beliefs, provide inappropriate responses, or create a false sense of support that delays contact with parents, counselors, healthcare professionals, or emergency services.

Families have long been understood as important sources of connection and guidance, but AI companions may blur the boundary between human relationships and simulated emotional interaction. Parents may therefore need to discuss not only screen time, but also what counts as trustworthy advice, emotional care, and meaningful support.

AI-Generated Content for Young Children

Concern also extends beyond conversational chatbots to the media children encounter through video platforms and recommendation systems. AI tools can produce large quantities of inexpensive children's content, including videos that appear

educational but contain incoherent stories, distorted images, garbled language, or inaccurate information (Lajka, 2026).

Because recommendation algorithms reward frequent uploads and sustained viewing, low-quality automated videos can be repeatedly presented to toddlers and preschool-aged children. Such material may feature warped faces, extra body parts, nonsensical text, or confusing versions of alphabet, animal, and counting lessons. The concern is therefore not simply that individual videos are strange or poorly made, but that commercial platforms can distribute large volumes of developmentally inappropriate material faster than parents or regulators can evaluate it. Parents may struggle to determine whether content is human-made, AI-generated, educational, misleading, or developmentally appropriate.

Family Digital Literacy and Institutional Responsibility

From a sociological perspective, AI represents a new frontier of parenting. Parents are increasingly expected to monitor not only social media and screen time but also automated systems that can act as companions, advisors, tutors, and perceived sources of emotional support. Youth risk is therefore shifting from primarily peer-based digital spaces toward private, continuous relationships between young people and algorithmic systems.

Families will need new forms of digital literacy and communication to navigate these technologies safely. This includes helping children recognize when they are interacting with an automated system, question the accuracy of AI-generated material, protect their images and personal information, and understand the difference between simulated empathy and genuine human care. It also requires conversations about privacy, consent, trust, and when young people should seek help from a real person rather than from an automated system.

At the same time, responsibility cannot rest with parents alone. Technology companies, schools, healthcare institutions, and governments also have roles to play in creating safeguards, establishing age-appropriate standards, and ensuring that vulnerable young people are directed toward meaningful human support. Attention should shift away from blaming individual parents and toward examining how families, corporations, schools, healthcare systems, and public policies share responsibility for children's safety and well-being in the age of AI.

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10.11: Conclusion

Concluding Remarks

This chapter examined parenting as both an intimate family relationship and a social process shaped by wider social forces. It explored the key functions of parenting, major sociological perspectives on family life, and the varied ways parents and caregivers raise, guide, and socialize children. It also considered how parenting styles, family diversity, childcare, economic strain, family disruption, digital media, artificial intelligence, and shifting cultural expectations shape children's development and family life.

Together, these discussions show that parenting is not simply a private activity or a matter of individual choice. Parents and caregivers raise children within social contexts shaped by gender, inequality, institutions, public policy, technology, and changing ideas about what "good parenting" requires. In the next chapter, attention turns to the family as a site of conflict, power, and harm.

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11: FAMILY VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

11.1: Learning Objectives

11.2: Introduction

11.3: Understanding Family Violence and Abuse

11.4: Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

11.5: Patterns of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Across Gender and Sexuality

11.6: Effects of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) on Survivors, Children, and Families

11.7: Sexual Violence

11.8: Anti-Violence Activism, #MeToo, and Social Change

11.9: Child Abuse and Neglect

11.10: Incest and Sibling Sexual Abuse

11.11: Elder Abuse and Neglect

11.12: Intergenerational Trauma and the Effects of Violence Across Generations

11.13: Theoretical Perspectives on Family Violence and Sexual Violence

11.14: Conclusion

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Chapter header image: Sydney Latham, photo "Love shouldn't hurt" written on a woman's back, via Unsplash. Used under the Unsplash License.

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11.1: Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Describe major forms of family violence and abuse
- Explain how social factors shape intimate partner violence (IPV)
- Describe how gender identity and sexual orientation affect patterns of intimate partner violence (IPV) and access to support
- Identify why leaving an abusive relationship can be difficult
- Explain the importance of consent in intimate relationships
- Describe how the #MeToo movement increased awareness of sexual violence and institutional failures
- Define child abuse and neglect and identify major forms of child maltreatment
- Explain why incest and sibling sexual abuse can be difficult to disclose
- Define elder abuse and neglect and identify its major forms
- Describe intergenerational trauma and how it can affect families across generations
- Apply sociological perspectives and family-focused frameworks to family and sexual violence

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11.2: Introduction

Content warning: This chapter discusses intimate partner violence (IPV), sexual violence, sexual coercion, child abuse and neglect, elder abuse, incest, and trauma. These topics may be distressing or triggering for some readers. Please engage with the material in whatever way feels safest and most manageable for you, including taking breaks or seeking support if needed.

Freedom from violence and abuse is a fundamental condition for families to create safety, stability, and trust. Yet violence and abuse remain common social problems that affect many families and intimate relationships. These harms can undermine caregiving, damage emotional bonds, disrupt children's development, and affect relationships both within and beyond the family.

Violence and abuse complicate the idealized view of families as naturally safe, private, and protective spaces. Families can be sources of love, care, and support, but they can also become sites of power, coercion, dependency, control, and harm. This chapter examines IPV, sexual violence, consent, child abuse and neglect, elder abuse, incest, and intergenerational trauma. Throughout, it asks how power, inequality, cultural norms, family relationships, communities, and institutions shape both violence and the possibilities for safety, accountability, and healing.

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11.3: Understanding Family Violence and Abuse

Understanding Family Violence and Abuse

Family violence refers to harmful behavior that occurs within family, household, caregiving, or intimate relationships. It may involve current or former partners, parents and children, siblings, extended family members, older adults, caregivers, or others connected through family-like ties.

Abuse can take many forms, including physical violence, sexual violence, emotional or psychological abuse, verbal abuse, financial or economic control, neglect, coercion, intimidation, and threats. What makes family violence especially harmful is that it often occurs within relationships expected to provide care, trust, intimacy, and protection.

Victims and survivors may depend on the person harming them for housing, income, immigration status, childcare, emotional support, transportation, or daily care. These dependencies can make abuse difficult to recognize, disclose, or escape. Shame, fear, love, financial need, concern for children, and lack of institutional support may also keep people connected to abusive relationships or households.

Understanding family violence sociologically therefore requires attention to both personal experience and broader social structure. The question is not only why individuals harm others, but how families, communities, institutions, and societies create conditions for safety, accountability, and healing.

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11.4: Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Understanding Intimate Partner Violence

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is recognized in the United States as a major public health and social issue because of the serious harm it causes to individuals, families, and communities. IPV refers to physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, verbal, or financial abuse used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control in an intimate relationship. It may occur in current or former relationships and can affect people of any gender identity or sexual orientation.

A sociology of the family perspective emphasizes that IPV is not simply a private conflict between two individuals. It occurs within relationships that are often expected to provide love, trust, care, and security. When one partner uses violence, intimidation, or control, the family or intimate relationship can become a site of fear, dependency, and harm. IPV can also affect children, extended family members, friendships, workplaces, and communities.

Historically, IPV in the United States has often been framed as violence perpetrated by men against women. Heterosexual women do experience IPV at high rates, and young women are at particularly high risk (Capaldi et al., 2012).. However, IPV also occurs against men and within LGBTQ+ relationships. The next section examines these patterns across gender and sexuality in more detail.



Figure 11.4.1: IPV is extremely common, especially for women. ("Fast Facts: Preventing Intimate Partner Violence" by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention via CDC. Public domain.)

Forms of Intimate Partner Violence

IPV often involves more than one form of abuse. Physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, and financial abuse may occur together as part of a broader pattern of coercion and control.

- Physical violence involves harmful or painful physical contact, including pushing, slapping, pulling hair, twisting arms, burning, beating, punching, choking, restraining, or using weapons.
- Sexual violence includes coercive or degrading sexual behaviors, unwanted sexual touching, reproductive coercion, and marital or partner rape.
- Psychological and emotional abuse involves threats, intimidation, humiliation, isolation, monitoring, manipulation, harming or threatening pets, depriving a partner of sleep or basic needs, and distorting reality in order to control the person being abused.
- Financial or economic abuse involves controlling a partner's access to money, employment, transportation, credit, housing, or other resources. Economic abuse can make it especially difficult to leave an abusive relationship.

Coercive Control

Many scholars and advocates emphasize the concept of coercive control. Coercive control refers to a pattern of domination that may include intimidation, surveillance, isolation, threats, emotional abuse, financial control, and restriction of a partner's freedom. This concept is important because IPV is not always limited to isolated incidents of physical violence. A relationship may be abusive even when physical violence is infrequent or absent.

Coercive control also helps explain why leaving an abusive relationship can be difficult and dangerous. A person experiencing IPV may be isolated from support, financially dependent on the abuser, afraid of retaliation, concerned about children or pets, or unsure whether institutions will protect them. The risk of violence may also increase when a person attempts to leave.

Support and Institutional Response

Community organizations play a crucial role in supporting people experiencing IPV. These organizations may provide safety planning, counseling, legal assistance, emergency shelter, housing support, childcare assistance, and connections to other social services. Such resources are essential because leaving an abusive relationship often requires practical support and institutional protection.

From a sociology of the family perspective, IPV reveals how private relationships are shaped by broader systems of power and support. Families, communities, police, courts, healthcare systems, shelters, workplaces, and public policies all influence whether abuse is recognized, whether survivors are believed, and whether people can access safety and long-term stability.

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11.5: Patterns of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Across Gender and Sexuality

Exploring Patterns of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Across Gender and Sexuality

The relationship between gender, sexuality, and intimate partner violence (IPV) remains a debated topic. Much of the discussion centers on how gender identity and sexual orientation shape rates of IPV, the forms abuse may take, and whether survivors have equal access to recognition, resources, and support. Because IPV can include isolated incidents, mutual conflict, self-defense, and ongoing coercive control, researchers must carefully distinguish between different forms, contexts, severity, and consequences of abuse.

One challenge in studying IPV is that silence, fear, shame, and stigma often surround abuse within families and intimate relationships. These dynamics can make people less likely to report abuse or even to identify their experiences as abusive. Over time, patterns of abuse may come to feel normal to those living within them, especially when the abuse has been ongoing. Subtle forms of abuse can be particularly difficult to recognize, even though they may lay the groundwork for more severe forms of coercion and control. In addition, inconsistent definitions of what counts as domestic violence or intimate partner violence make it difficult for researchers to draw clear and consistent conclusions across studies.

IPV Against Women

Although prevalence estimates vary across studies, especially depending on how IPV is defined, cross-cultural and U.S. research consistently shows that women are more likely than men to experience severe forms of IPV and to be injured by an abusive partner. According to the CDC's 2023/2024 data brief, 22.5% of women and 13.7% of men in the United States have experienced physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetimes, while 18.2% of women and 8.6% of men have experienced severe physical violence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2026). These findings suggest that gender differences in IPV are especially important when considering the severity and consequences of abuse.



Figure 11.5.1: "Let's Talk, Not Fight" design created by Colin Henderson for the 2012 Domestic Violence Awareness Rally. (Copyright; Colin Henderson via source)

Women's experiences of IPV are also shaped by broader patterns of gender inequality. Economic dependence, caregiving responsibilities, fear of not being believed, concern for children, and the risk of escalating violence may all make leaving an abusive relationship difficult. This does not mean that women are passive; rather, it shows how intimate decisions are shaped by

structural constraints and unequal access to safety.

IPV Against Men

Determining how many cases of intimate partner violence involve male victims can be challenging. Men who experience abuse may be reluctant to seek help because of stigma, shame, and cultural expectations surrounding masculinity. Men may fear that others will not take their experiences seriously, may feel pressure to appear strong or self-reliant, or may worry that reporting abuse will conflict with dominant ideas about masculinity. Some research has also found that women may be more likely to view aggression against men as acceptable or less serious.



Figure 11.5.2: Family Violence: Kalighat Painting, "Woman Striking Man With Broom," Calcutta, India, 1875. (Copyright; LibreTexts via Sociology (Boundless), CC BY-SA.)

At the same time, scholars caution that some estimates of violence against men may be inflated when studies count acts of self-defense as equivalent to patterns of coercive abuse. For this reason, researchers often emphasize the importance of examining not only whether violence occurred, but also the context, frequency, severity, injury, fear, and pattern of control involved.

Gender roles and social expectations can shape abusive situations, so examining these dynamics is important for understanding and addressing IPV. It is also important to consider how race, social class, religion, sexuality, and broader belief systems influence both experiences of abuse and responses to it. However, research on whether sexist attitudes are directly correlated with domestic violence has produced mixed results.

IPV in LGBTQ+ Relationships

Intimate partner violence also occurs in same-sex relationships. Research suggests that lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals may experience IPV at rates comparable to or higher than heterosexual adults, although patterns vary across groups and forms of abuse (Rollè et al., 2018). The CDC has also noted the importance of subgroup estimates by sexual orientation in understanding violence victimization. Because of this, many organizations now use gender-neutral and inclusive language when discussing both victimization and perpetration.

Historically, same-sex IPV received far less public and scholarly attention than violence in heterosexual relationships. As LGBTQ+ issues gained greater public visibility, however, researchers began to study abuse in same-sex relationships more systematically. Older research often concluded that lesbians and gay men could be just as likely as heterosexual adults to experience partner abuse, but scholars also cautioned that the evidence base was limited and methodologically uneven. More recent work continues to show that IPV in sexual minority relationships is a significant issue, while also stressing that experiences differ across lesbian, gay, bisexual, and other LGBTQ+ populations and that identity-based abuse can be an important part of these relationships.



Figure 11.5.3: Domestic violence also occurs in same-sex relationships. (“Spousal Violence in Same-sex Relationships” by Sociology (Boundless) via LibreTexts. CC BY-SA.)

LGBTQ+ survivors may face distinctive barriers to support. Some may fear being outed, disbelieved, blamed, or mistreated by police, courts, shelters, healthcare providers, or family members. Abusers may also use identity-based tactics, such as threatening to disclose someone’s sexual orientation or gender identity, undermining their connection to LGBTQ+ communities, or claiming that no one will believe abuse occurred in a same-sex or queer relationship. These dynamics show how heterosexism, cissexism, and institutional exclusion can shape both the experience of abuse and access to safety.

Patterns of IPV across gender and sexuality reveal that abuse is shaped by social power as well as intimate relationships. Gender norms, masculinity, heteronormativity, economic dependence, stigma, and institutional responses all influence how IPV is experienced, reported, recognized, and addressed.

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11.6: Effects of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) on Survivors, Children, and Families

Exploring the Effects of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) on Survivors, Children, and Families

Intimate partner violence (IPV) can have serious consequences for survivors, children, families, and communities. Although IPV often occurs behind closed doors, its effects extend far beyond the couple relationship. IPV disrupts the family's expected functions of care, safety, emotional support, socialization, and stability.

Children's exposure to IPV is a serious social problem in the United States. CDC data indicate that children in many households witness abuse between parents or guardians. In the 2016/2017 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, 15.6% of women with children under 18 in the household reported that a child had ever seen or heard a parent or guardian being subjected to psychological aggression by that parent's current or former intimate partner, and 10.7% reported that a child had ever seen or heard physical violence. Among men with children under 18 in the household, 7.3% reported that a child had ever seen or heard psychological aggression, and 5.3% reported that a child had ever seen or heard physical violence (Leemis et al., 2022). Children do not have to be directly harmed to be affected by IPV. Seeing, hearing, or living with the fear and instability created by abuse can shape children's emotional security and development. Research suggests that exposure to family violence can contribute to anxiety, aggression, trauma symptoms, difficulties at school, and challenges in relationships with peers, family members, and authority figures.

IPV can also have profound emotional and psychological effects on survivors. High levels of stress, fear, and anxiety are commonly reported by people who are still living with abusive partners. Depression is also widespread, as survivors may be subjected to ongoing criticism, blame, isolation, and control. Many survivors also experience trauma symptoms, suicidality, or an increased risk of suicide. Even after leaving an abusive relationship, survivors may feel overwhelmed by the extent to which the abuse has undermined their autonomy, confidence, relationships, and sense of self.

Intimate partner violence can also have serious financial consequences. Because abusers often use economic control and social isolation as tools of power, survivors may have little money of their own and few people they can rely on when seeking help. Financial dependence can make leaving an abusive relationship especially difficult, particularly when survivors are also caring for children, lack access to housing, or fear retaliation. This shows that leaving abuse is not simply an individual decision; it is shaped by access to income, childcare, transportation, legal protection, housing, and community support.

Survivors, Victims, and the Politics of Language

Bulhan (1985) refers to people who have experienced violence as "survivors" rather than "victims." The distinction matters because the term victim can reinforce an image of passivity and subordination, while survivor emphasizes agency, resilience, and self-determination (Bulhan, 1985). At the same time, both terms can be useful in different contexts. "Victim" may be used in legal, medical, or crisis settings to name harm and establish responsibility, while "survivor" emphasizes resistance, recovery, and agency. This language underscores that sexual violence and intimate partner violence are not only widespread social problems, but also sites of resistance in which survivors have organized, advocated for change, and challenged institutions.

Medical and psychological professionals have developed several frameworks to describe the effects of violence against women. While these frameworks brought greater recognition to the harms of abuse and helped justify treatment and legal intervention, they have also been criticized for individualizing and medicalizing gendered violence. Rather than focusing on the broader social and cultural conditions that enable abuse, these approaches sometimes center on the survivor as the object of diagnosis.

One example is Battered Women's Syndrome, developed by Lenore Walker, which explains why some abused women remain with or return to abusive partners through the concept of learned helplessness. Another is Rape Trauma Syndrome, which describes a range of responses to sexual assault, including delayed reporting, fragmented memory, unusual calmness, or anger toward institutional authorities (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2004). Although these concepts have sometimes helped courts better understand the dynamics of abuse, they have also been criticized for portraying survivors as passive, damaged, or irrational.

In contrast, feminist scholars and anti-violence activists emphasize that survivors are not merely passive victims of violence. They are social actors with the capacity to resist abuse, seek justice, build collective movements, and challenge the institutions that have often failed to protect them. This approach shifts attention away from pathologizing survivors and toward understanding violence as a structural issue shaped by gender inequality, power, and social institutions.

Institutions themselves have an ideological dimension. They are shaped by particular historical and cultural contexts, but they also shape society by influencing how violence is understood, how survivors are treated, and what kinds of responses are considered legitimate. Police, courts, healthcare systems, schools, workplaces, shelters, and social service agencies can either support survivors or reproduce barriers to safety. A sociology of the family perspective therefore asks not only how violence affects families, but also how institutions define, recognize, and respond to family violence.

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11.7: Sexual Violence

Exploring Sexual Violence

Sexual violence includes harassment, assault, rape, and other forms of unwanted sexual contact or coercion. Like intimate partner violence, sexual violence is not simply an individual act of harm; it is shaped by social norms, gender inequality, power, institutional responses, and cultural ideas about sexuality and consent.

A common misconception is that women are at greatest risk of sexual violence from strangers. In reality, sexual violence is often perpetrated by people the victim or survivor knows, including intimate partners, acquaintances, classmates, coworkers, and family members. According to recent CDC data, almost half of women and more than 1 in 6 men in the United States have experienced some form of contact sexual violence in their lifetimes. More than 1 in 5 women and 1 in 31 men have experienced completed or attempted rape, and 1 in 26 men have been made to penetrate someone during their lifetime (CDC, 2025). Sexual violence also affects people across gender identities and sexual orientations, including LGBTQ+ people. Because many survivors do not report sexual violence, existing statistics likely underestimate its true prevalence.

Video: What is Sexual Violence?

Duration: 1 minute and 31 seconds.

The video explains sexual violence as a public health problem and emphasizes prevention (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.).

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Marital rape is a form of sexual violence in which one spouse forces, pressures, or coerces the other into sexual activity without consent. In the United States, marital rape was long excluded from rape laws because marriage was treated as implying ongoing sexual consent. Although all fifty states had criminalized marital rape by 1993, the history of these laws reflects broader patterns of gender inequality and unequal power within marriage. Marital rape shows how marriage has historically been shaped by legal and cultural assumptions about gender, sexuality, authority, and obligation.

Sexual violence is not limited to marriage or private household settings. It also occurs in dating relationships, workplaces, schools, religious institutions, military settings, and college campuses. These examples show that sexual violence is both intimate and institutional: it can occur in private relationships, but it is also shaped by the organizations and cultures in which people live, study, work, and socialize.

Exploring Consent

Understanding the distinction between consent and non-consent is fundamental in any relationship in which people may engage in sexual activity. Consent is commonly defined as "an agreement between participants to engage in sexual activity" that "should be clearly and freely communicated" (What Consent Looks Like, n.d.).

Video: Tea Consent

Duration: 2 minutes and 50 seconds.

The video provides an accessible introduction to the concept of consent (Blue Seat Studios, 2015).

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Consent matters because intimate relationships are shaped by trust, communication, power, and expectations. Sexual activity within dating, marriage, hookups, or long-term partnerships should never be treated as automatic or owed. Consent requires that each person has the freedom, information, and capacity to make a meaningful choice.

Consent in Relationships

In any relationship, consent is necessary every time sexual activity is initiated, no matter how long the relationship has lasted or what kind of relationship it is. People have the right to change their minds at any point, including during a sexual encounter. Just because someone agreed to something before does not mean they consent to it again, and consent to one sexual act does not mean consent to all sexual acts.

In healthy relationships, partners communicate openly and honestly about boundaries and comfort levels, from hand-holding and touching to sexual intercourse. Whether someone is with a crush, partner, significant other, or hookup, they always have the right to decide what they do or do not want to do physically (Office on Women's Health, 2021).

Sexual coercion occurs when someone is pressured, manipulated, threatened, guilted, or worn down into sexual activity. This is important because non-consent is not limited to physical force. Sexual activity can be harmful and coercive even when a person eventually stops resisting or gives in under pressure.

Consent in Law

Consent must also be understood in legal as well as interpersonal terms. In California, the age of consent is 18, and sexual intercourse with a person under that age may be prosecuted as unlawful sexual intercourse. California law also recognizes that legal consent may be compromised by developmental disability, physical disability, unconsciousness, or intoxication, and that a current or prior dating or marital relationship does not, by itself, establish consent (California Penal Code § 261.5, n.d.).

There is no single legal definition of consent in the United States. RAINN notes that each state establishes its own definition through statutes and court decisions (RAINN 2025). In general, states tend to analyze consent in three main ways: whether consent was clearly expressed, whether it was freely given, and whether the person had the capacity to consent.

- Affirmative consent asks whether a person clearly expressed agreement to engage in sexual activity.
- Freely given consent asks whether that agreement was voluntary and not obtained through coercion, fraud, force, pressure, or threats.
- Capacity to consent asks whether a person had the legal and practical ability to consent, including whether they were of legal age and not incapacitated by intoxication, unconsciousness, disability, or other limiting conditions.

Planned Parenthood offers a helpful acronym for understanding consent, explaining that "consent is as easy as FRIES" (Planned Parenthood Federation of America, n.d.). According to this framework, consent must be freely given, reversible, informed, enthusiastic, and specific. This means that consent must be offered without pressure or impairment; can be withdrawn at any time; requires accurate information; should involve genuine willingness rather than fear or obligation; and applies only to the specific activity being agreed to.

Understanding consent sociologically means looking beyond individual choices to examine the cultural and institutional conditions that shape sexual behavior. Gender norms, peer pressure, alcohol use, dating scripts, marriage expectations, media messages, and unequal power can all affect how consent is communicated, respected, or ignored. Teaching consent is therefore not only about preventing individual harm; it is also about building healthier relationships, families, and communities.



Figure 11.7.1: "Yes means yes, no means no" illustrates the importance of clear, affirmative consent in sexual relationships. (“Yes means yes, no means no” by louisa_catlover via LibreTexts).

Sociologists and legal scholars continue to debate whether current legal categories adequately capture the range of sexual violations people experience. Fennell (2026) argues that sexual assault law and public discourse often treat very different forms of violation under broad categories, even though harm, intent, coercion, and context may vary. This perspective encourages a more nuanced understanding of consent—one that recognizes sexual assault as a social and legal problem shaped by power, communication, cultural expectations, and institutional definitions (Fennell, 2026).

Sexual Violence on College Campuses

College-aged adults face elevated risks of sexual violence, whether or not they are enrolled in college. Older national data found that male college-aged students ages 18 to 24 were more likely than non-students of the same age to experience rape or sexual assault, while female college-aged students were somewhat less likely than their non-student peers to experience these forms of victimization (Sinozich & Langton, 2014).

At the same time, recent campus climate surveys show that sexual misconduct remains a significant problem on many campuses, especially among undergraduates and gender-diverse students. In the 2024 Higher Education Sexual Misconduct and Awareness survey, which included 10 participating colleges and universities, undergraduates reported nonconsensual sexual contact at rates two to three times higher than graduate and professional students (Cantor et al., 2024). One campus report from that project found that 25.3% of undergraduate women, 10.6% of undergraduate men, and 20.3% of gender nonbinary, transgender, questioning, or other self-described gender identity students reported nonconsensual sexual contact since entering Georgetown (Georgetown University, 2024). Because these findings are based on participating campuses rather than a nationally representative sample, they should be interpreted with caution. However, they still show that sexual violence remains a significant institutional concern in higher education.

Sexual violence persists on many residential four-year campuses for a variety of institutional and cultural reasons. Students may lack clear knowledge about how to report sexual violence, and when reports are made, colleges and universities do not always respond adequately or impose meaningful consequences on perpetrators. Heavy alcohol use, especially in some Greek life and athletic settings, can contribute to environments in which sexual violence is more likely to occur. In some cases, perpetrators also use drug-facilitated assault, including so-called date rape drugs, to incapacitate victims and undermine consent. Insufficient education about consent and healthy relationships also remains an important barrier to prevention.

These themes are explored in The Hunting Ground, a documentary that draws attention to campus sexual assault and critiques the ways colleges and universities have sometimes failed to protect students and respond effectively to survivors (Dick, 2015). Similar themes appear in Hamilton and Armstrong’s (2012) discussion of Greek life in "The (Mis)Education of Monica and Karen," which shows how fraternity-centered party culture can reinforce gender inequality and place women in vulnerable social situations (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2012).

Trailer: The Hunting Ground

Duration: 2 minutes and 12 seconds.

The Hunting Ground examines campus sexual assault and critiques how colleges and universities have sometimes failed to protect students and respond effectively to survivors. The documentary was directed by Kirby Dick and produced by Amy Ziering (Dick, 2015).

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Rape Culture and Institutional Accountability

One of the major problems in the United States is that society has often failed to adequately address sexual violence and consistently support survivors. Current RAINN data indicate that out of every 1,000 sexual assaults, 310 are reported to police, 50 reports lead to arrest, 28 cases lead to a felony conviction, and 25 perpetrators are sentenced to incarceration (RAINN, 2025). These numbers illustrate the large gap between the prevalence of sexual violence and formal legal accountability.

Rather than living in a society in which institutions reliably hold perpetrators accountable, the United States continues to reflect elements of rape culture. Rape culture refers to a social environment in which sexual violence is normalized, trivialized, excused, or dismissed, and survivors are often met with disbelief, blame, or inadequate support. Rape culture does not mean that everyone approves of rape. Rather, it refers to the beliefs, practices, and institutional failures that minimize sexual violence, shift blame onto survivors, or make accountability difficult.

Rape culture can be found in many social institutions. It is evident when survivors who report sexual violence are met with disbelief, blame, or questions that imply responsibility for the assault rather than concern for their safety and well-being. For example, when a student reports being raped at a fraternity party and is asked what they were wearing or how much they had to drink, the focus shifts away from the perpetrator's actions and onto the survivor's behavior.

Rape culture is also reflected in the criminal justice system. The Brock Turner case became a widely discussed example of how institutional responses can minimize sexual violence. Turner was convicted of sexually assaulting an unconscious and intoxicated college student after two bystanders intervened. During the public backlash to the case, Turner's father referred to the assault as "20 minutes of action," a phrase many critics saw as trivializing sexual violence. Judge Aaron Persky sentenced Turner to six months in county jail and three years of probation, a punishment that many viewed as strikingly lenient (Stack, 2016). The case became a national symbol of how privilege, gender, and institutional responses can shape accountability for sexual violence.

Rape culture is also reproduced through popular culture, including music and media that normalize or trivialize sexual coercion. A widely criticized example came from Rick Ross's 2013 verse on "U.O.E.N.O.," in which lyrics were interpreted as describing drugging a woman without her knowledge. The controversy drew national backlash and highlighted how popular culture can reinforce harmful attitudes about consent and sexual assault.

Together, these examples show that rape culture is not limited to individual beliefs or behaviors. It is embedded in institutional responses, legal outcomes, campus cultures, media messages, and everyday assumptions about gender and sexuality. Sexual violence often affects intimate relationships, family trust, caregiving, parenting, and intergenerational well-being. Challenging sexual violence therefore requires both cultural change and institutional accountability.

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11.8: Anti-Violence Activism, #MeToo, and Social Change

Exploring Anti-Violence Activism, #MeToo, and Social Change

Anti-violence activism has a long history in feminist, women-of-color, LGBTQ+, survivor-led, and community-based movements. These movements have challenged the idea that sexual violence and domestic violence are private problems and have instead framed them as social problems shaped by power, inequality, and institutional failure.

#MeToo is a social movement against sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and rape culture in which people share their experiences publicly in order to expose the widespread nature of sexual violence. Although activist and sexual assault survivor Tarana Burke first used the phrase "Me Too" in 2006 on Myspace to support survivors, especially those from marginalized communities, the movement gained worldwide visibility in 2017 when the hashtag #MeToo went viral on social media after actress Alyssa Milano encouraged people to share their experiences of sexual harassment and assault. Burke emphasized that sexual violence affects people across race, social class, and gender, but social responses to that violence are deeply unequal.



Figure 11.8.1: "Me Too" sign, representing the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and rape culture. (Public domain; Lum3n.com)

The #MeToo movement gave many survivors a platform to speak, created solidarity among those affected by sexual violence, and increased public awareness of rape culture and institutional failure. It also showed how digital media can transform private experiences into collective visibility and public accountability. As discussed previously in the chapter on Sex and Gender, Harris and Giuffre's "#Me Too in the Kitchen" shows how workplace sexual harassment can be enabled by organizational cultures and industry norms, not simply by individual offenders (Harris & Giuffre, 2020).

At the same time, the movement reveals how systems of inequality shape who is believed, who receives support, and who is protected by law. Women of color, LGBTQ+ survivors, working-class survivors, undocumented survivors, and others with less institutional power may face greater disbelief, retaliation, or lack of support when reporting sexual harassment or assault.

In this way, #MeToo highlights that sexual violence is not only an individual problem but also a structural one. Although the movement was created to amplify voices that have often been ignored, it still operates within larger cultural scripts about who counts as a "credible" victim and who is seen as an abuser.

The MaestraPeace mural on San Francisco's Women's Building visually represents women's resilience, leadership, and collective struggle for justice. In a chapter on family violence and abuse, the mural serves as a reminder that survivors and advocates have not only responded to violence individually, but have also built collective movements for safety, healing, accountability, and social change.



Figure 11.8.2: “MAESTRAPEACE” Building, Northeast Corner. The MaestraPeace mural on San Francisco’s Women’s Building represents women’s resilience, leadership, and collective struggle for justice. (Copyright; Juana Alicia, Miranda Bergman, Edythe Boone, Susan Kelk Cervantes, Meera Desai, Yvonne Littleton, and Irene Perez via The Women’s Building)

Anti-violence activism matters because sexual violence and domestic violence affect intimacy, caregiving, parenting, trust, and intergenerational well-being. Movements such as #MeToo challenge the silence surrounding abuse and show how families, communities, workplaces, schools, courts, and media institutions all play a role in either reproducing harm or supporting safety and justice.

Licenses and Attributions for Anti-Violence Activism, #MeToo, and Social Change

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11.9: Child Abuse and Neglect

Exploring Child Abuse and Neglect

Child abuse and neglect, often referred to as child maltreatment, include acts of harm and failures of care that threaten a child's safety, development, and well-being. Child abuse may involve physical, emotional, verbal, or sexual mistreatment, while neglect involves failing to meet a child's basic physical, emotional, medical, educational, or supervisory needs.

Child abuse and neglect are widespread social problems. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, at least 1 in 7 children in the United States experienced abuse or neglect in the past year, although this is likely an underestimate because many cases are never reported (CDC, 2024a). Child maltreatment is especially concerning because it can be a form of trauma. SAMHSA defines trauma as the result of an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening and has lasting adverse effects on mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.

Child abuse and neglect challenge the idealized view of the family as a naturally safe and protective institution. Families are expected to provide care, socialization, emotional support, and protection, but family relationships can also become sites of power, dependency, fear, and harm. At the same time, child maltreatment is not only an individual family problem. It is shaped by poverty, social isolation, substance use, mental health challenges, housing instability, family stress, community violence, and unequal access to support.

Forms of Child Abuse and Neglect

Child maltreatment can take several forms. These forms may occur separately, but they often overlap.

- Physical abuse involves completed or attempted acts that cause physical pain or injury to a child. This can include hitting, kicking, shaking, burning, choking, pulling hair, or other forms of physical aggression. In many cases, child protective services become involved when suspected abuse includes bruises, injuries, or other visible signs of harm.
- Emotional abuse refers to nonphysical mistreatment that damages a child's emotional development and well-being. This can include humiliation, threats, rejection, manipulation, intimidation, isolation, or persistent criticism. Emotional abuse may occur on its own, but it also frequently accompanies physical or sexual abuse. Because its effects are often less visible than physical injuries, emotional abuse can be more difficult to identify and prove.
- Sexual abuse involves sexual contact, exploitation, or exposure imposed on a child by an older child, adolescent, or adult. It can include molestation, statutory rape, exposure, exploitation, pornography, trafficking, incest, or other sexually abusive activities. Sexual abuse is also a common adverse childhood experience, or ACE. About 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 13 boys experience child sexual abuse at some point in childhood, and 91% of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by someone the child or their family knows (CDC, 2024b).
- Neglect involves the failure to meet a child's basic needs. This may include inadequate food, clothing, shelter, supervision, medical care, education, or emotional support. Neglect is one of the most commonly reported forms of child maltreatment. Sociologically, it is important to distinguish neglect from poverty itself. A family's lack of resources does not automatically mean a parent is neglectful. However, poverty, housing insecurity, and lack of access to childcare, healthcare, and social support can increase family stress and make caregiving more difficult.
- In the most extreme cases, family violence may result in the death of a child. Filicide refers to the killing of a child by a parent or parent-equivalent caregiver. Although rare, it highlights the most severe end of child maltreatment and may be connected to fatal abuse, domestic violence, mental health crises, family separation, or firearm access (Boyette, 2026).

Child welfare systems play an important role in protecting children from harm, but they also raise sociological questions about surveillance, inequality, and institutional power. Families living in poverty may be more likely to come into contact with child protective systems, while families with more resources may be better able to keep similar problems private. This does not mean child abuse should be minimized; rather, it shows why child protection must be paired with social supports that strengthen families and reduce harm.

Video: How Childhood Trauma Affects Health Across a Lifetime

Duration: 16 minutes and 2 seconds.

Dr. Nadine Burke Harris explains how adverse childhood experiences, including abuse and neglect, can affect brain development, health, and well-being across the life course (Burke Harris, 2015).

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

View this YouTube Video online

Adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, refer to potentially traumatic experiences in childhood, including abuse, neglect, and household violence. Nadine Burke Harris's TED talk helps connect this section's discussion of child maltreatment to the broader life-course effects of trauma, showing how early experiences of harm can shape health, development, relationships, and family well-being long after childhood (Burke Harris, 2015).

Spanking, Corporal Punishment, and the Boundary Between Discipline and Abuse

Physical abuse of children can take many forms, including beating, kicking, choking, burning, throwing, hitting with objects, or other acts that cause physical harm. Injury resulting from these behaviors may be considered abuse even when a parent or caregiver claims they did not intend to harm the child. In contrast, some forms of physical punishment, such as spanking, have historically not been classified as abuse when they do not result in visible injury.

Spanking remains a controversial issue in the United States. Some parents view corporal punishment as an acceptable or effective response to children's misbehavior, while others see it as harmful and as part of a broader continuum of violence against children. From a sociological perspective, debates over spanking reflect broader questions about power, authority, socialization, and the boundary between discipline and violence in family life.

The use of physical punishment is shaped by culture, region, education, religion, and institutional norms. Research has found that parents living in the South are more likely than those in other regions of the United States to report spanking their children, and parents without a college education are also more likely to use spanking as a disciplinary method (Crandall, 2011). At the institutional level, corporal punishment has persisted in some school systems, showing that norms about discipline are embedded not only in families but also in broader social institutions.

Although some adults defend spanking as discipline, research increasingly questions its effectiveness. Studies suggest that spanking is not an especially effective long-term strategy for changing behavior and may instead be associated with increased aggression, anxiety, and other negative outcomes, particularly when children are spanked at young ages (Berlin et al., 2009).

Recent research suggests that corporal punishment remains both widespread and socially patterned. Globally, UNICEF reports that about 1.2 billion children are subjected to corporal punishment at home, and that nearly 400 million children under age 5 regularly experience psychological aggression or physical punishment from caregivers (UNICEF 2025). In the United States, corporal punishment has declined but has not disappeared. It remains legal in public schools in some states, and federal school data show that its use is not distributed evenly across students. Black boys and American Indian or Alaska Native boys are disproportionately represented among students receiving corporal punishment in public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2025).

Corporal punishment is not simply an individual parenting choice. It is shaped by cultural beliefs about obedience, authority, childhood, race, social class, religion, and institutional discipline. Debates over spanking therefore reveal how societies define appropriate parenting, how children's bodies are regulated, and how ideas about discipline can reproduce broader inequalities.

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11.10: Incest and Sibling Sexual Abuse

Exploring Incest and Sibling Sexual Abuse

Incest refers to sexual relations between people defined as close family members or relatives. This usually includes people related by blood and, in some cases, relatives connected through marriage, adoption, or step-family relationships. Most societies have strong taboos against incest, although the exact boundaries of these taboos have varied across cultures and historical periods.

A major concern surrounding incest is the unequal power that often exists within families. Family relationships can involve differences in age, authority, dependency, caregiving responsibility, and trust, which can make genuine consent difficult or impossible. When a family member pressures, coerces, or forces another family member into sexual activity, it is considered sexual abuse or sexual assault. If the victim is a minor, it is classified as child sexual abuse and is a crime.

Incest taboos and laws are often understood as serving both social and biological purposes. Socially, they help preserve family boundaries, roles, and expectations of care. Biologically, reproduction between close relatives increases the risk that harmful recessive genetic traits will be passed on. From a sociological perspective, however, the central concern is not only biology, but also the protection of family relationships from coercion, exploitation, and abuse of power.

Sibling incest is often described as the most commonly reported form of incest, with father-daughter incest the second most common (Finkelhor, 1990). However, scholars emphasize the importance of distinguishing between normative childhood curiosity and abusive sexual behavior. Children may ask questions about bodies and sexuality as part of development, and parents and caregivers play an important role in offering developmentally appropriate sex education that teaches bodily autonomy, consent, privacy, and clear boundaries. Such education can help children develop a healthy understanding of sexuality and strengthen their capacity to exercise agency over their own bodies.

At the same time, sexual behavior between siblings may take the form of abuse. Sibling sexual abuse (SSA) refers to sexual behavior between siblings that is not age-appropriate, is not motivated by mutual curiosity, and typically occurs more than once (Bertele & Talmon, 2023; Tener et al., 2021; Watts, 2020). SSA does not necessarily involve overt physical force, but it often includes coercion and unequal power dynamics (Bertele & Talmon, 2023). In this context, siblings may include biological siblings, half-siblings, step-siblings, cousins, foster siblings, or other children raised together in the same household (Watts, 2020).

Although sibling sexual abuse is often described as one of the most common forms of child sexual abuse, it remains surrounded by silence, denial, and minimization, sometimes to an even greater extent than other forms of intrafamilial sexual abuse (Caffaro, 2017; Tener et al., 2021; Tidefors et al., 2010; Watts, 2020; Yates & Allardyce, 2021). Research from multiple countries indicates that SSA is frequently overlooked or downplayed by professionals in education, healthcare, and social services (Yates & Allardyce, 2021). Children may face significant barriers to disclosing incest or sibling sexual abuse. They may fear not being believed, worry about getting a family member in trouble, feel responsible for keeping the family together, or depend on the person who is harming them for care, housing, or emotional connection. These dynamics can make disclosure especially difficult and help explain why abuse within families may remain hidden for long periods of time.

Sociologically, this silence reflects the strong cultural belief that families are inherently safe, private, and protective spaces. These assumptions can obscure abuse within families and make disclosure and intervention more difficult. Incest and sibling sexual abuse are therefore not simply private family matters; they are shaped by social norms, family structure, secrecy, dependency, and power relations.

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11.11: Elder Abuse and Neglect

Exploring Elder Abuse and Neglect

Elder abuse occurs when an older adult is harmed, neglected, deprived of needed care, or exploited by a caregiver or another trusted person. Abuse, neglect, and exploitation are experienced by about 1 in 10 people aged 60 and older who live at home (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). Elder abuse is often underreported in the United States because older adults may experience fear, embarrassment, dependence on the abuser, cognitive impairment, limited mobility, or social isolation.

Elder abuse is a serious public health and social problem because it can undermine an older adult's safety, emotional well-being, financial security, independence, and quality of life. Risk factors include functional disability, cognitive impairment, poor physical or mental health, limited social support, financial dependence, lower socioeconomic status, caregiver stress, substance misuse, and broader social inequalities (Muehlbauer & Crane, 2006; Pillemer et al., 2016). Rather than having a single cause, elder abuse often emerges from the interaction of individual vulnerabilities, family dynamics, caregiving pressures, cultural norms, and inadequate social support.

Elder abuse challenges the assumption that families always provide safety, care, and protection across the life course. Older adults may depend on family members or caregivers for housing, transportation, medical care, financial management, or daily support. These relationships can provide love and stability, but they can also create opportunities for control, coercion, neglect, or exploitation when adequate support systems are absent.

Forms of Elder Abuse

Elder abuse can take several forms (National Center on Elder Abuse, n.d.):

- Physical abuse involves the use of force that may result in bodily injury, pain, or impairment.
- Sexual abuse refers to nonconsensual sexual contact of any kind with an older adult.
- Emotional or psychological abuse involves verbal or nonverbal acts that inflict anguish, distress, humiliation, intimidation, or fear.
- Financial or material exploitation is the illegal or improper use of an older adult's money, property, benefits, or assets.
- Neglect is the refusal or failure to fulfill caregiving responsibilities, including providing food, shelter, medical care, hygiene, supervision, or protection.
- Abandonment refers to the desertion of an older person by someone responsible for their care.
- Self-neglect occurs when an older adult's own behavior threatens their health or safety, such as when they are unable to obtain food, medication, shelter, or necessary care.

Preventing and Responding to Elder Abuse

Preventing elder abuse requires attention to both family relationships and broader systems of care. Strategies include learning to recognize signs of abuse, educating families and caregivers, supporting overburdened caregivers, reducing social isolation, improving access to healthcare and social services, and listening carefully to older adults about their needs and concerns. Suspected abuse can be reported to Adult Protective Services or other appropriate authorities.

A sociological approach emphasizes that elder abuse is not simply the result of individual cruelty or family failure. It is also shaped by ageism, caregiver burden, economic insecurity, disability, social isolation, and the organization of long-term care. Protecting older adults therefore requires strengthening families, supporting caregivers, expanding community resources, and ensuring that institutions respond effectively when abuse, neglect, or exploitation occurs.

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11.12: Intergenerational Trauma and the Effects of Violence Across Generations

Exploring Intergenerational Trauma and the Effects of Violence Across Generations

The American Psychological Association defines intergenerational trauma as a process in which descendants of people who experienced traumatic events may show emotional, behavioral, or relational effects connected to that earlier trauma (American Psychological Association, 2019; American Psychological Association, 2023). From a family systems perspective, trauma can reverberate across generations by shaping parenting practices, communication patterns, emotional regulation, attachment, and family relationships.

Possible effects of intergenerational trauma may include anxiety, shame, guilt, depression, low self-esteem, hypervigilance, intrusive thoughts, substance misuse, dissociation, suicidality, difficulty regulating aggression, and challenges with trust, intimacy, and attachment. These effects do not appear in the same way in every family, and trauma does not determine a family's future. Families and communities may also develop resilience, survival strategies, cultural memory, and practices of healing.

Intergenerational trauma has affected many groups, including descendants of Holocaust survivors (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018), Rwandan genocide survivors, Native American boarding school survivors, enslaved people, refugees, and communities affected by colonization, war, forced migration, racial violence, and family separation. Researchers argue that trauma may be transmitted across generations through socialization, as family members pass on patterns of coping, relating, silence, fear, distrust, protection, values, and beliefs.

There is also emerging evidence that trauma may have biological effects across generations (Yehuda et al., 2016). Epigenetics is the study of how behaviors and environmental conditions can influence gene expression without changing the DNA sequence itself. Some research suggests that traumatic experiences may be associated with epigenetic differences among survivors and their children. However, this evidence is still developing and should not be treated as a complete explanation for intergenerational trauma. Social conditions, family relationships, cultural history, and institutional inequalities remain central to understanding how trauma is passed on and how healing becomes possible.

Whether transmitted through socialization, biology, or both, intergenerational trauma can threaten a family's sense of safety and disrupt relationships across generations. It may weaken attachment, communication, and emotional closeness between grandparents, parents, and children. It may also contribute to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), family instability, substance use disorders, mental health struggles, and difficulties regulating stress.

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11.13: Theoretical Perspectives on Family Violence and Sexual Violence

Exploring Theoretical Perspectives on Family Violence and Sexual Violence

Family violence and sexual violence are often experienced as deeply personal forms of trauma, but sociology helps us understand them as social problems. They occur within relationships, households, communities, and institutions shaped by power, inequality, culture, and social norms. Families are often expected to provide care, safety, intimacy, socialization, emotional support, and protection but when violence occurs within or around family life, it disrupts these expected functions and reveals how private relationships are connected to broader social structures.

Sociologist Anna Leon-Guerrero defines a social problem as "a social condition or pattern of behavior that has negative consequences for individuals, our social world, or our physical world" (Leon-Guerrero, 2019, p. 4). Family violence and sexual violence fit this definition because they harm individuals while also affecting families, communities, workplaces, schools, healthcare systems, legal systems, and public trust.



Figure 11.13.1: Sociologist Dr. Anna Leon-Guerrero explains that social problems involve both individual experiences and the broader social world, encouraging students to connect personal troubles with public issues. (Copyright; Anna Leon-Guerrero)

Structural Functionalist Perspective

From a Structural Functionalist perspective, violence and abuse disrupt the family's expected roles of caregiving, protection, socialization, emotional support, and stability. However, other theoretical perspectives help explain why violence occurs, how it is interpreted, and why some families and survivors face greater barriers to safety and support.

Conflict and Feminist Perspectives

From a conflict perspective, family violence and sexual violence are linked to unequal power and domination. Violence is not simply the result of individual deviance or poor decision-making. It is shaped by broader inequalities that allow some groups to hold more power over others. Families and intimate relationships are not separate from these inequalities; they can reproduce larger hierarchies based on gender, age, sexuality, race, social class, disability, immigration status, and economic dependence.

Feminist theory builds on this analysis by emphasizing the role of patriarchy, gender inequality, and cultural norms that normalize control, minimize survivors' experiences, and blame victims for the violence committed against them. Feminist scholars and activists have argued that domestic violence, sexual violence, and child sexual abuse should not be treated as private family matters. Instead, they must be understood as structural issues shaped by law, media, gender norms, institutional practices, and unequal access to protection. Feminist perspectives also highlight survivor agency and the long history of anti-violence activism that has brought hidden forms of violence into public view.

Social Exchange Theory and Constraints on Leaving

Social Exchange Theory helps explain why survivors of intimate partner violence or abuse within relationships may remain in harmful situations. This perspective suggests that people weigh perceived costs, benefits, risks, and available alternatives in relationships. However, these choices are not made under conditions of full freedom or equality.

A survivor may face poverty, homelessness, custody disputes, immigration concerns, retaliation, social isolation, or escalated violence if they attempt to leave. Those with fewer economic resources, less family support, insecure housing, or primary responsibility for children may have especially limited options. From this perspective, staying in an abusive relationship does not mean that the abuse is acceptable or that the survivor is passive. Rather, it shows how intimate decisions are shaped by structural constraints and limited alternatives.

Symbolic Interactionism and the Meanings of Violence

Symbolic Interactionism focuses on how people create, interpret, and negotiate meanings in everyday life. This perspective helps explain why family violence and sexual violence are not always recognized or named as abuse. Meanings attached to "discipline," "consent," "privacy," "family loyalty," "marital obligation," and "victim" or "survivor" can shape whether harmful behavior is minimized, excused, reported, or challenged.

For example, physical punishment may be interpreted by some families as discipline rather than violence; sexual pressure within marriage may be misread as obligation rather than coercion; and family loyalty may discourage children, partners, or older adults from disclosing abuse. Symbolic Interactionism therefore shows that violence is not only shaped by power and institutions, but also by everyday meanings that influence how people understand harm, responsibility, and help-seeking.

Family Systems and Life-Course Perspectives

Family systems theory emphasizes that violence affects more than one person within a household. Abuse can disrupt communication, trust, attachment, parenting, caregiving, and emotional security across the family system. Children who witness violence may experience fear, confusion, divided loyalties, or long-term effects on their own relationships and sense of safety. Older adults who experience neglect or exploitation may become isolated from support and dependent on the very people harming them.

A life-course perspective also helps explain how violence can shape family relationships over time. Childhood abuse, intimate partner violence, sexual violence, elder abuse, and intergenerational trauma may affect mental health, parenting practices, trust, attachment, and family stability across generations. This does not mean that violence inevitably determines the future. Families and communities can also develop resilience, seek support, and interrupt cycles of harm.

Intersectionality and Unequal Risk

An intersectional perspective shows that family violence and sexual violence do not affect all groups in the same way. Gender matters, but gender never operates alone (Crenshaw, 1991). Race, social class, sexuality, disability, age, immigration status, housing insecurity, and involvement with institutions such as child welfare, policing, healthcare, and education all shape vulnerability and access to support.

For example, women, children, LGBTQ+ people, people with disabilities, older adults, undocumented people, people experiencing homelessness, and people involved in sex work may face distinct risks and barriers to protection. Intersectionality helps explain that vulnerability is not produced by identity alone, but by the way multiple identities and social inequalities overlap, compound one another, and shape access to power, resources, credibility, and institutional protection.

The Continuum of Sexual Violence

A sociological approach also encourages us to think about violence as existing along a continuum. Family violence and sexual violence include not only extreme criminal acts, but also patterns of coercion, intimidation, humiliation, control, harassment, neglect, and boundary violations. Viewing violence as a continuum helps show how everyday norms, jokes, pressures, silences, and institutional failures can create conditions in which more serious forms of harm become possible (Kelly, 1988).

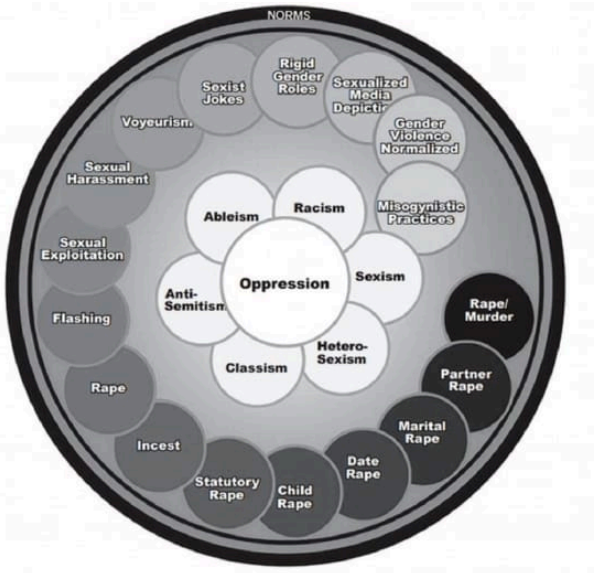


Figure 11.13.2: "The Sexual Violence Continuum" shows how sexual violence exists along a continuum of oppressive systems of power, social norms, and individual actions. (Fair use; Lydia Guy via LibreTexts)

Taken together, these perspectives show that family violence and sexual violence are not simply private problems caused by a few harmful individuals. They are social problems shaped by power, inequality, family structure, cultural meanings, and institutional responses. Understanding violence sociologically helps connect private suffering to public issues and highlights the need for both individual support and broader social change.

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11.14: Conclusion

Concluding Remarks

Family violence and abuse are not simply private troubles that happen behind closed doors. They are major social problems shaped by power, inequality, cultural norms, family relationships, and institutional responses to harm. As this chapter has shown, intimate partner violence (IPV), sexual violence, child abuse and neglect, elder abuse, incest, and intergenerational trauma can have lasting effects on individuals, families, communities, and future generations.

A sociological perspective helps us see that violence and abuse are connected to larger issues such as gender inequality, economic dependence, stigma, ageism, heteronormativity, family roles, institutional failure, and unequal access to protection and support. It also helps us understand why consent, coercive control, survivor agency, and accountability matter. Families are often expected to provide care, trust, safety, and emotional support, but they can also become sites of fear, dependency, secrecy, and harm.

At the same time, this chapter has emphasized that people who experience violence are not only victims of harm. Survivors resist abuse, seek help, protect others, build support networks, challenge institutions, and contribute to social change. Anti-violence activism, including survivor-led movements such as #MeToo, shows that violence can be challenged not only at the individual level, but also through cultural change, institutional accountability, and collective action. Understanding family violence and abuse therefore requires attention to both personal experience and broader social structure. In the next chapter, we will continue examining conflict and change in family life by exploring divorce and remarriage.

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12: DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

12.1: Learning Objectives
12.2: Introduction
12.3: Divorce and the Legal Process
12.4: Measuring Divorce
12.5: A Brief History of U.S. Divorce Trends
12.6: Social Patterns in Divorce
12.7: Why Marriages End—Common Pathways to Divorce
12.8: Child Custody, Parenting Plans, and Co-Parenting
12.9: The Impact of Divorce
12.10: Remarriage, Repartnering, and Blended Families
12.11: Conclusion

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12.1: Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Differentiate between fault-based and no-fault divorce systems
- Distinguish between the crude divorce rate, refined divorce rate, and cohort (predictive) divorce estimates
- Identify recent trends in U.S. divorce
- Describe how divorce risk varies across the U.S. population
- Identify common pathways to divorce
- Explain key child custody terms
- Describe the impact of divorce on spouses and children
- Define remarriage and describe its prevalence

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12.2: Introduction

This chapter continues our focus on conflict and change in family life by examining separation, divorce, remarriage, and blended families. Divorce is one of the most discussed features of modern family life, but it is often misunderstood. Because marriage has become less common over time, understanding how divorce is measured is essential for interpreting divorce trends accurately.

Rather than treating divorce simply as a personal failure or private decision, this chapter examines divorce as both a legal process and a social process shaped by law, gender, inequality, cultural expectations, and changing ideas about marriage. It provides a brief history of U.S. divorce patterns, explores how divorce risk varies across the population, and examines common pathways that lead marriages to end.

The chapter also considers how divorce affects adults, children, parenting, economic security, and family relationships. It concludes by examining remarriage, repartnering, and blended families, showing how families reorganize after marital dissolution and how new family forms create both opportunities and challenges.

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12.3: Divorce and the Legal Process

Exploring Divorce and the Legal Process

Because divorce is a legal process, it reflects the values and power structures of the society that regulates it. Across time and place, governments and religious institutions have debated who has the authority to define marriage and determine when it can be dissolved. As a result, the grounds for divorce—and access to divorce—have historically been tied to broader struggles over individual rights, gender equality, religious authority, and the relationship between church and state.

The TED-Ed animation by historian Rod Phillips provides a useful historical overview before we turn to contemporary divorce laws and how divorce cases move through the courts.

Video: When did Human Start Getting Divorced

Duration: 5 minutes and 38 seconds.

In this TED-Ed animation, historian Rod Phillips explains how divorce has been shaped by changing struggles over marriage, religion, law, individual rights, and women's rights (Phillips, n.d.).

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

View this YouTube Video online

Defining Divorce

Divorce is the legal dissolution of a marriage. It ends the legal rights and responsibilities that come with the marital relationship. While divorce laws and procedures vary by place, most require a formal legal process, usually involving a court or other authorized body.

Divorce proceedings may also address related matters such as spousal support, also called alimony; child custody and visitation; child support; and the division of property, assets, and debt. In this way, divorce does not simply end a couple relationship. It also reorganizes households, parenting arrangements, financial obligations, and family roles.

Types of Divorce

Although divorce laws vary by jurisdiction, or legal region, most legal systems follow one of two basic approaches: no-fault divorce or fault-based divorce. In the United States, no-fault divorce first emerged in California in 1969 and took effect in 1970, marking a major legal shift away from requiring proof of wrongdoing.

- In a no-fault system, a couple can end a marriage without proving that either spouse committed a specific wrongdoing. In some places, it is enough to state that the marriage has suffered an "irretrievable breakdown" or that the couple has "irreconcilable differences."
- In contrast, fault-based systems require one spouse to prove that the other spouse violated marital expectations in a serious way, such as through adultery, cruelty, abandonment, or abuse. These legally recognized reasons are called the grounds for divorce. Historically, fault-based divorce could make leaving a marriage more difficult, especially for spouses with less money, legal knowledge, or social power.

Jurisdictions also differ in how divorce cases move through the legal process. Some offer a summary divorce, a simplified procedure available to couples who meet certain eligibility requirements, often involving a short marriage, no children, and limited

shared property or debt.

When spouses are able to reach agreement on key issues such as property division, child custody, and support, the divorce is considered uncontested, and court approval is generally more straightforward. If spouses cannot reach agreement, the divorce becomes contested, meaning the court may need to decide unresolved issues, including how to divide property and how to arrange custody, parenting time, and financial support.

Divorce mediation is an alternative to courtroom litigation. In mediation, a neutral mediator helps spouses communicate, clarify options, and negotiate possible solutions. When mediation is successful, the couple typically produces a settlement agreement that can be submitted to the court for approval.

Divorce Among Same-Sex Married Couples in the United States

After nationwide marriage equality, same-sex married couples gained the same basic legal rights and responsibilities as different-sex married couples. This means that same-sex couples generally divorce under the same state laws and procedures as different-sex couples.

However, divorce can still be complicated by many of the same issues that affect other couples, including state residency requirements, differences between fault and no-fault rules, parenting disputes, child custody, spousal support, and property division. Same-sex divorce also reminds us that legal recognition matters: when relationships are recognized by law, the state also regulates how those relationships can be ended.

Divorce law shows that marriage is not only a private relationship between two people but also a social institution shaped by law, religion, gender, sexuality, parenting, property, and state power. Divorce changes legal status, but it also reorganizes family life, household membership, caregiving responsibilities, economic resources, and kinship ties.

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12.4: Measuring Divorce

Measuring Divorce

When people talk about "the divorce rate," they are often referring to different statistics. Sociologists and demographers use several measures of divorce because each one answers a different question. Understanding the denominator—who is being counted as "at risk" of divorce—is especially important as marriage has become less common over time.

Measuring divorce is not just a technical issue. It shapes how we understand family change. A statistic that appears to show a decline in divorce may partly reflect the fact that fewer people are marrying in the first place. For this reason, sociologists pay close attention to how divorce is counted before drawing conclusions about whether marriages are becoming more or less stable.

Crude Divorce Rate

The crude divorce rate is the number of divorces in a given year per 1,000 people in the total population. This is one of the most common "headline" rates because it is simple to calculate and easy to compare across years.

However, the crude divorce rate has an important limitation: its denominator includes many people who cannot divorce, including children, never-married adults, widowed people, and others who are not currently married. As a result, the crude divorce rate can decline even if the chance that a married person divorces stays the same, simply because a smaller share of the population is married.

Refined Divorce Rate

The refined divorce rate is a more precise measure because it focuses on people who are actually at risk of divorce. It is typically defined as the number of divorces per 1,000 married women, often ages 15 and older.

This measure is especially useful when marriage rates change over time. Because it focuses on married people rather than the total population, the refined divorce rate gives a clearer picture of how common divorce is among those who are currently married.

Cohort or Predictive Divorce Estimates

Another common measure is the cohort, or predictive, divorce estimate. This refers to the estimated percentage of people who marry in a particular year or period who will eventually divorce at some point before death.

Unlike the crude and refined divorce rates, which describe divorces occurring in a single year, cohort estimates describe the long-term likelihood that marriages formed in a particular period will eventually end in divorce. These estimates are often used in claims such as "a certain percentage of marriages will end in divorce." However, because cohort estimates rely on projections and assumptions, the exact percentage varies depending on the method used and the population being studied. Estimates may also differ for first marriages, remarriages, and marriages formed at different historical moments.

Problems with Divorce Data

All U.S. divorce statistics have measurement challenges. The federal collection of detailed divorce data was suspended in 1996, and national counts and crude divorce rates now rely on data from the states that report divorce totals in a given year. This means that divorce data are useful, but they are not perfect.

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12.5: A Brief History of U.S. Divorce Trends

Exploring a Brief History of U.S. Divorce Trends

U.S. divorce rates have changed significantly over time, rising and falling in response to broader economic, legal, and cultural shifts. Divorce increased during the early twentieth century and rose sharply around the World War II era, often linked to economic strain, wartime separation, and postwar family disruption. After the war, divorce declined as the economy expanded and marriage and family life were promoted as patriotic ideals. Divorce dipped again during the 1950s before rising sharply through the 1960s and 1970s, reaching a modern peak around 1980 (Cherlin, 2009). Since that peak, divorce rates have generally declined.

These trends show that divorce is not simply the result of individual marital failure. Divorce rates rise and fall alongside changes in gender roles, economic conditions, legal systems, cultural expectations, and ideas about what marriage should provide.

Explaining the Post-1950s Rise in Divorce

We cannot know with certainty why the divorce rate rose so sharply in the 1960s and 1970s, but some common explanations are incomplete. Firstly, there is little reason to think that marriages suddenly became less happy during that period. Although data on marital satisfaction across decades are limited, the best available research suggests that satisfaction did not noticeably decline after the 1950s. What changed instead was behavior. After the 1950s, people became more willing to end marriages that were already unhappy, making divorce a more common response to marital distress.

Second, some commentators have blamed the second-wave feminist movement for rising divorce rates, often claiming that feminism encouraged women to view marriage as oppressive. However, the timing does not support this argument. The women's movement gained visibility in the late 1960s and became nationally prominent in the early 1970s, but the divorce rate had already begun increasing several years earlier. If the trend was already underway, it does not make sense to treat feminism as the primary cause. A more sociological explanation points to broader structural and cultural changes in family life.

One important factor was women's growing economic independence. As more women entered the labor force, many became less financially dependent on their husbands, even though women's wages often remained lower than men's. Greater earnings and work experience made it more possible for women in unhappy or harmful marriages to leave because they were better able to support themselves after separation or divorce (Hiedemann, Suhomlinova, & O'Rand, 1998).

At the same time, dual-earner families often faced new pressures. Coordinating work schedules, childcare, household labor, and emotional expectations increased daily stress and reduced time for intimacy and problem-solving. When couples have less time and energy to address conflict, marital satisfaction may decline and divorce may become more likely.

Public attitudes toward divorce also changed. Disapproval of divorce has declined since the 1950s, even though negative views have not disappeared (Cherlin, 2009). Whereas divorce was once widely seen as a moral failure, it is now more often viewed as a normal, if still difficult, part of life. Along with this shift, the belief that couples should remain in unhappy marriages "for the sake of the children" has weakened, and ending a distressed marriage is increasingly seen as an acceptable option.



Figure 12.5.1: Disapproval of divorce has declined since the 1950s, and divorce is now considered a normal, if still difficult, part of family life. (Copyright; Thinkstock).

Historian Stephanie Coontz argues that modern divorce is not simply a sign of weaker commitment. It is also a consequence of how marriage itself changed historically. Once marriage came to be based more strongly on love, mutual affection, intimacy, and personal fulfillment, people became more willing to leave marriages that were unhappy, unequal, or harmful. Using the sociological imagination, divorce can therefore be understood as more than an individual private trouble. It is also shaped by public issues such as women's changing economic opportunities, shifting cultural expectations about marriage, and legal reforms that made ending a failed marriage more feasible.

Legal change also contributed to rising divorce. Historically, most states required spouses to prove "fault," such as adultery, cruelty, or abandonment, in order to end a marriage. Today, all states allow some form of no-fault divorce, meaning a couple can divorce by stating that the marriage has broken down due to irreconcilable differences. When divorce becomes simpler, less adversarial, and less costly, more people are able to pursue it. However, divorce rates began increasing before many states adopted no-fault laws, suggesting that legal change was not the original cause. No-fault divorce is therefore best understood as one contributing factor that reinforced broader changes already underway (Kneip & Bauer, 2009).

Recent Trends in U.S. Divorce

Over roughly the last quarter century, divorce rates in the United States have declined steadily and are now closer to levels seen around 1970 (Wang, 2020). Using the refined divorce rate, which measures divorces per 1,000 married women, the U.S. divorce rate peaked at about 22.6 divorces per 1,000 married women around 1980. By 2023, it had declined to 14.4 divorces per 1,000 married women, and by 2024 it had declined slightly again to 14.2. In other words, divorce has become less common among married people than it was at its peak. This pattern shows a long-term downward trend rather than continued increases (Hays, 2025; Westrick-Payne, 2025).

Recent estimates also complicate the long-popular claim that "half of all marriages end in divorce." Cohort-based estimates suggest that about 40% of today's first marriages may eventually end in divorce, while the risk is typically higher for remarriages (Bailey, 2025).

Researchers point to several likely explanations for the decline in divorce.

- Firstly, people are marrying at older ages and later marriage is associated with greater marital stability.
- Second, the educational attainment of those who marry has increased and higher education is also linked to lower divorce risk.
- Third, fewer people are marrying in the first place and fewer marriages also means fewer divorces. For example, in 2019 there were 16.3 new marriages per 1,000 women ages 15 and over, down from 17.6 in 2009 (Anderson and Scherer, 2020).

Is Less Divorce Always Better?

Falling divorce rates are often interpreted as good news and as a counterpoint to the idea that modern family life is in decline. However, they also raise an important sociological question: is less divorce always better?

Sociologist Philip N. Cohen (2017) argues that divorce trends are more complicated than a simple story of family decline or family recovery (Cohen, 2017). Most people who marry hope to stay together, but divorce is not like crime: a society with no divorce would not necessarily be healthier or more just. If divorce were impossible or extremely difficult to obtain, people could be trapped in unhappy, unequal, or abusive marriages.

At the same time, very high divorce rates may suggest that many marriages are under strain or that couples lack adequate support for resolving conflict, managing economic stress, or balancing work and family responsibilities. From this perspective, a moderate level of divorce may be healthiest: high enough that harmful or deeply distressed marriages can end, but not so high that marriages dissolve without opportunities for repair, support, or reflection.

There is no universally agreed-upon ideal divorce rate. However, Cohen's argument encourages us to move beyond the assumption that more divorce is always bad or that less divorce is always good. Divorce can involve loss, instability, and economic hardship, but it can also be a pathway through which families reduce conflict, escape harm, and reorganize toward greater safety and stability.

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12.6: Social Patterns in Divorce

Exploring Social Patterns in Divorce

Divorce does not occur equally across the U.S. population. Some groups are more likely to divorce than others, and divorce risk varies by marriage cohort, age at marriage, education, social class, region, race, birthplace, prior marital history, and whether a marriage is a first marriage or remarriage. For this reason, sociologists caution against relying on a single, timeless "divorce rate" that applies to everyone.

Region, Age at Marriage, and Education

Regional patterns differ across the United States. Using American Community Survey data, research indicates that men and women in the Northeast and Midwest tend to have the lowest divorce rates, while the South generally has the highest. One reason divorce rates may be higher in the South is that marriage rates are higher to begin with and people often marry at younger-than-average ages, both of which are associated with greater divorce risk. In the Northeast, marriage is less common and first marriages are often delayed, which contributes to lower divorce rates (Reynolds, 2020). These are broad patterns, however, and there are important exceptions. For example, the District of Columbia has a high marriage rate but one of the lowest divorce rates (Anderson & Scherer, 2020).

Education is also linked to divorce risk. Adults with a bachelor's degree or higher are less likely to have divorced than adults with less education (Hays, 2025). This pattern does not mean that education automatically protects a marriage. Rather, education is connected to other forms of advantage, including income, employment stability, later age at marriage, and access to social resources. This suggests that marital stability is shaped not only by personal commitment but also by broader patterns of inequality.

Race, Birthplace, and Marriage Cohort

Among ever-married adults, Black Americans are the most likely to report that their first marriage ended in divorce, while Asian Americans are the least likely. U.S.-born adults are also more likely than immigrants to report that their first marriage ended in divorce (Hays, 2025).

Divorce also varies by marriage cohort. Adults who married in the 1970s and 1980s have been more likely to divorce than those who married in the 1990s or later, although more recent marriage cohorts have not yet been observed across the full life course. This is important because divorce is shaped by historical context. People who marry in different decades face different economic conditions, gender norms, legal systems, and cultural expectations about marriage.

Gray Divorce

Gray divorce refers to divorce among adults age 50 and older. Although overall divorce rates in the United States have declined in recent decades, divorce among older adults has become more visible. Divorce among adults over 50 rose sharply between 1990 and 2010 and has since leveled off, but nearly 40% of divorces today involve people age 50 or older (Pearson, 2026). In 2023, the gray divorce rate was about 10.3 divorces per 1,000 married women age 50 and older (Hays, 2025).

Sociologists argue that gray divorce reflects more than individual unhappiness. It is connected to longer life expectancy, changing gender roles, reduced stigma around divorce, and changing expectations for marriage. As people live longer, later adulthood may include many years, or even decades, after children leave home or after retirement. Some older adults may decide that they do not want to spend those years in an "empty-shell marriage," a relationship that continues legally or socially but lacks emotional connection, intimacy, or vitality (Pearson, 2026).

This pattern also reflects changing ideas about what marriage is supposed to provide. In earlier generations, people may have been more likely to remain married because marriage was understood primarily as an economic arrangement, parenting partnership, or lifelong social obligation. Today, marriage is more often expected to provide companionship, emotional intimacy, mutual support, and personal fulfillment. When those expectations are not met, some older adults may be less willing to remain

in marriages that feel emotionally empty.

Gender is especially important in understanding gray divorce. Women's greater economic independence, longer work histories, and changing expectations for equality in marriage may make it more possible for some women to leave unsatisfying or unequal relationships later in life. At the same time, gray divorce can create serious economic risks, especially for women who spent years out of the paid labor force or who have fewer retirement assets.

Timing and Duration of Marriage

Divorces are concentrated earlier in marriage, although later-life and long-term divorces also occur as discussed above. About four in ten divorces occur within the first decade of marriage, while about 22% occur after 25 or more years of marriage. The median duration of marriages ending in divorce increased from 10 years in 2008 to 12 years in 2023 (Hays, 2025).

These patterns show that divorce is not a single event with one meaning. Divorce after a short marriage may involve different challenges than divorce after decades of shared property, parenting, caregiving, and kinship ties. The timing of divorce affects how families reorganize and what kinds of emotional, financial, and caregiving issues arise.

Same-Sex Divorce Trends

In the United States, there is no single official national same-sex divorce rate tracked consistently across all states. As a result, researchers often rely on administrative data from specific states and time periods. One influential Williams Institute analysis of early marriage-equality states estimated that same-sex couples ended their marriages at an average rate of about 1.1% per year, which was slightly lower than the often-cited annual divorce rate for different-sex couples of around 2% per year. However, these estimates vary by place, time period, and available data.

Once same-sex couples gained access to marriage, they also gained access to divorce, custody claims, property division, spousal support, and other legal processes that organize family relationships. Divorce among same-sex couples therefore reflects both relationship dynamics and the broader legal recognition of LGBTQ+ families.

Intergenerational Patterns in Divorce

Divorce is often described as having an intergenerational pattern. People who grew up with divorced parents are, on average, more likely to divorce themselves. Wolfinger (2005) found that children of divorced parents have higher odds of divorce than those whose parents remained continuously married, and that the risk is even greater for those whose parents divorced and later remarried (Wolfinger, 2005).

One explanation is socialization. Growing up with divorce may make divorce seem like a more normal or workable response to marital problems. Another explanation is family stress: children may carry forward the effects of conflict, economic strain, disrupted routines, or changing family relationships. This does not mean that children of divorced parents are destined to divorce. Rather, it shows that family experiences can shape later expectations about marriage, conflict, commitment, and family stability.

Divorce, Work, Income, and Remarriage

Divorce is also connected to employment, income, wealth, and future family formation. Divorced adults generally have lower household incomes and less wealth than married adults. Divorce is also associated with different employment patterns by gender: divorced men are less likely to be employed than men in a first marriage, while divorced women are more likely to be employed than women in a first marriage (Hays, 2025).

Many divorced adults eventually form new relationships. About two-thirds of divorced adults remarry, while a smaller share cohabit instead (Hays, 2025). This shows that divorce does not necessarily mean rejection of marriage or family life. Instead, divorce often leads to family reorganization through repartnering, remarriage, cohabitation, stepfamilies, and blended families.

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12.7: Why Marriages End—Common Pathways to Divorce

Exploring Why Marriages End: Common Pathways to Divorce

No single factor explains every divorce. Marriages end for many reasons, and the meaning of divorce varies across couples, families, and social contexts. However, research points to several common pathways that can increase marital strain, including infidelity, intimate partner violence, declining marital satisfaction, midlife transitions, economic insecurity, addictive behaviors, and the added pressures of parenting. These factors do not automatically lead to divorce, but they can weaken trust, increase conflict, and erode a couple's sense of shared commitment over time.

The following section explores several common pathways through which marriages may become unstable:

- Adultery is a legal/marital-status term that refers specifically to sex with someone other than one's spouse while legally married. Because it is tied to marriage, it sometimes has relevance in divorce proceedings, even where it is not a crime.
- Infidelity is a broader relationship term that refers to breaking a couple's expectations or agreements about exclusivity. It can involve sexual behavior, emotional involvement, or other boundary-crossing behaviors (depending on what the partners define as cheating), and it can occur in dating, cohabiting, or married relationships.
- Intimate partner violence (IPV)—often referred to as domestic violence—describes a pattern of behaviors used by one partner to exert power and control over another in an intimate relationship, including physical, sexual, emotional, and economic abuse, as well as coercive control.
- Declining marital satisfaction: marital satisfaction often starts high in the newlywed years but declines for many couples over the first several years. As routines and responsibilities take hold, day-to-day excitement can fade and stressors such as work, money, household labor, and parenting may become more central. This shift does not mean a marriage is failing, but it can reveal differences in expectations and coping styles and increase conflict if couples struggle to adapt.
- Midlife transitions—often referred to as a "midlife crisis"—describe a period when some adults become more aware of their mortality and begin to reassess the direction of their lives. The term midlife crisis is commonly traced to psychoanalyst Elliott Jaques, who introduced it in 1965 to describe the emotional upheaval that can occur when people confront life's limits and time left (Jaques, 1965). For some individuals, this reassessment may be accompanied by abrupt changes in behavior—such as shifts in relationships, work, or lifestyle—as they seek renewed meaning, excitement, or a different sense of self.
- Growing apart over the life course: as people age, their priorities, values, and life goals can shift, and some couples find they no longer feel aligned in the same ways they once did. When partners grow in different directions—or interpret new life stages (career changes, parenting, aging parents, health issues) differently—relationship strain can increase and divorce can become more likely (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2004).
- Marrying young and limited relationship experience: age at first marriage is strongly associated with the likelihood of divorce. People who marry very young often have less time to develop a stable sense of self, complete schooling or job training, and build relationship skills before making a long-term commitment. Delaying marriage can provide more opportunity to gain life experience and to choose a partner who is more compatible in values, goals, and expectations—factors that can support greater marital stability.
- Addictive behaviors refer to patterns of substance use or compulsive activities—such as alcohol misuse or problem gambling—that become difficult to control and continue despite negative consequences for health, finances, work, or relationships.
- Economic insecurity is a major source of strain in many marriages, and research suggests that financial stress can increase the risk of divorce. For example, research highlighted by the University of Virginia's National Marriage Project reports that couples who begin marriage with no financial assets are about 70% more likely to divorce than couples with at least $10,000 in assets. Having an asset base—such as savings, a home, or retirement funds—can buffer couples during setbacks (job loss, unexpected expenses) and reduce conflict. At the same time, low assets often overlap with other risk factors (like younger age at marriage and lower educational attainment) that are also tied to lower earnings and economic instability.
- Parenting stress and the transition to parenthood: Moving from being a couple, or dyad, to becoming parents, or a triad, can increase both financial strain and emotional stress. Couples must adjust to new demands on their time, sleep, income, household labor, and caregiving responsibilities. Research on the transition to parenthood finds that relationship quality often declines after the birth of a first child, making this period a particularly stressful phase for many couples (Doss et al., 2009). The strain can be even greater for parents of multiples. For example, one widely cited estimate reports that married couples with twins or triplets are about 17% more likely to divorce than couples whose children were single births (McKay, 2010).

Marital Separation

These pathways do not automatically lead to divorce, but they can build over time and erode trust, satisfaction, and a sense of shared commitment. When couples feel stuck in ongoing conflict, emotional distance, or unhappiness, a common next step is marital separation.

Marital separation is an in-between stage between living together and legally divorcing. It may involve one partner moving out, the couple dividing finances, negotiating parenting schedules, or creating separate routines. Some separations are intended to create space for repair, counseling, or reflection. Others function more like a trial divorce, allowing partners to test whether reconciliation is realistic.

Separation can also make divorce feel more feasible. As partners establish separate households, manage parenting apart, and build new routines, the shared couple identity may weaken. Marital separation is important because it shows that divorce is often a process rather than a single event. Families may begin reorganizing long before a legal divorce is finalized.

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12.8: Child Custody, Parenting Plans, and Co-Parenting

Exploring Child Custody, Parenting Plans, and Co-Parenting

Child custody refers to the legal rights and responsibilities parents have in relation to their children after separation or divorce. Custody arrangements address both where a child lives and who has authority to make major decisions about the child's life, such as education, healthcare, and religious upbringing. Guardianship is a related but distinct legal term that may apply when someone other than a parent has legal responsibility for a child.

Questions about custody and visitation commonly arise in divorce, annulment, separation, and other family law proceedings involving children. In most jurisdictions, courts make decisions based on the best interests of the child. Because these decisions affect children's daily routines, family relationships, household resources, and parents' identities, custody disputes can become some of the most emotionally charged aspects of family law. Many parents reach agreements through negotiation or mediation, but when conflict escalates, custody litigation can become lengthy, costly, and adversarial.

Types of Custody

Family law typically distinguishes between physical custody and legal custody. Physical custody, sometimes called residential custody, refers to where the child lives and who provides day-to-day care. Sole physical custody means that the child lives primarily with one parent, while the other parent usually has scheduled parenting time. Joint physical custody means that the child spends substantial time living with both parents, although this does not necessarily mean an equal 50/50 split.

Legal custody refers to the authority to make major decisions about the child's life, including decisions about education, medical care, and religious upbringing. Sole legal custody means that one parent has decision-making authority. Joint legal custody means that parents share decision-making responsibility.

Custodial and Noncustodial Parents

A custodial parent is a parent who has been granted physical and/or legal custody by court order. A child custody determination is a court order that establishes legal custody, physical custody, or parenting time. It may be temporary or permanent, and it may be an initial order or a later modification.

A noncustodial parent is a parent who does not have primary physical custody, though they may still share legal custody. Noncustodial parents typically have scheduled parenting time, sometimes called visitation. Child custody orders are distinct from child support orders, which address financial obligations.

Child Custody Laws in the United States

In Troxel v. Granville (2000), the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed that parents have a fundamental right to make decisions concerning the care, custody, and control of their children. In custody disputes, however, courts must also consider the best interests of the child. State laws vary, but many emphasize that children's safety, stability, emotional well-being, and relationships with caregivers should guide custody decisions.

Parenting Plans and New Legal Language

In some jurisdictions, courts and legal professionals increasingly use terms such as "parenting schedule," "parenting time," or "parenting plan" instead of "custody" and "visitation." This language reduces the sense that one parent is the "main" parent and the other is secondary. It also shifts attention toward the practical organization of children's lives after separation or divorce.

A parenting plan may outline where children will live, how holidays and vacations will be handled, how parents will make decisions, how transportation will be arranged, and how conflicts will be resolved. Ideally, parenting plans are designed around children's developmental needs. Younger children may benefit from shorter but more frequent time with each parent, while older children and teenagers may do better with fewer transitions and longer blocks of time.

Co-parenting after divorce requires ongoing communication and coordination. Parents may no longer be spouses or romantic partners, but they often remain connected through shared responsibility for their children. When co-parenting is cooperative and low-conflict, children may adjust more easily to living across two households. When conflict remains high, children may experience greater stress, divided loyalties, and instability. In this way, custody and parenting plans are not only legal arrangements; they are also part of the broader process of family reorganization after divorce.

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12.9: The Impact of Divorce

Exploring the Impact of Divorce

Divorce can reshape family life in significant ways, but its effects are not the same for every family. This section examines the financial and psychological consequences of divorce for adults, as well as the factors that shape children's adjustment, including parental conflict, economic stability, caregiving routines, and supportive parent–child relationships.

Financial Consequences of Divorce

A large body of research examines how divorce affects spouses and children, although scholars do not always agree on the size or causes of these effects. One pattern, however, is clear: women face a substantially higher risk of economic hardship after marital dissolution. This is partly because women are more likely to have fewer financial resources, interrupted work histories, lower wages, and/or caregiving responsibilities, and divorce often removes access to a spouse's income (Gadalla, 2008).

National data reflect this inequality. In 2024, married-couple family households had a median income of about $128,700, compared with about $60,440 for family households headed by a woman with no spouse present (Kollar & Scherer, 2025). Poverty rates also differed sharply: about 4.3% of married-couple families lived below the official poverty line, compared with 21.8% of female-householder families with no spouse present (Kollar & Scherer, 2025).

Psychological Consequences of Divorce

The psychological consequences of divorce are more complex. Researchers ask whether people are better off, worse off, or about the same after divorce, and the findings are mixed. On average, divorced adults often report lower happiness and poorer mental health, yet other studies find that well-being can improve over time, especially when divorce ends a highly distressed marriage (Williams, 2003; Waite, Luo, & Lewin, 2009).

Timing also matters: psychological health may decline during the stressful period surrounding divorce but rebound in later years. Outcomes also depend on the quality of the marriage before it ended. Divorce following chronic conflict, hostility, or violence may bring relief, while divorce from a lower-conflict marriage is more likely to be associated with declines in well-being (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007).

How Are Children Affected by Divorce?

Children's outcomes after divorce have been studied extensively. In the past, many parents stayed together "for the sake of the children," assuming that divorce would inevitably be more harmful than remaining married. Research does show that, on average, children whose parents divorce face higher risks of lower academic performance, behavioral problems, substance use, and emotional distress compared with children in continuously married families (Sun & Li, 2009; Amato & Cheadle, 2008). However, these average differences are not destiny. Many children adjust well, and outcomes depend heavily on family context, especially the level of parental conflict, economic stability, parenting quality, and access to emotional support.

A major challenge in this research is separating the effects of divorce itself from the conflict and strain that often precede it. Some children's difficulties may reflect prolonged stress in a high-conflict family environment rather than the legal breakup alone. Consistent with this, children tend to fare better when divorce ends a highly contentious or unsafe marriage, but they may fare worse when divorce ends a relatively low-conflict marriage (Booth & Amato, 2001; Hull, Meier, & Ortyl, 2010). Arkowitz and Lilienfeld similarly conclude that many children experience short-term distress after divorce, but symptoms often diminish within about two years, and most children do well in the long run (Arkowitz and Lilienfeld, 2013). Longer-term problems are concentrated among a smaller group and are most strongly associated with ongoing parental conflict, disrupted parenting, and economic instability.

Children may also feel confused, frightened, or responsible when divorce disrupts their sense of family stability. Some worry that the divorce is their fault or try to fix the situation by bringing their parents back together (Amato, 2004). Age matters as well. School-aged children may understand that separation is happening but not fully understand the reasons behind it. Adolescents

may better recognize the conflict that led to divorce, yet still experience fear, loneliness, guilt, or pressure to choose sides. Infants and preschool-age children may be especially affected by disruptions in routine and caregiving, because predictability and consistent attachment relationships are central to their sense of security (Schramm & Becher, 2013).

Children's adjustment is also shaped by their relationships with parents after divorce. In general, children tend to do better when they have stable, supportive relationships with both parents, when this is safe and feasible. Active involvement from a nonresident parent—often the father—can be linked to fewer behavior problems, while warm and consistent parenting from the residential parent—often the mother—is also associated with better adjustment. These patterns depend heavily on context, including conflict, safety, and parenting quality. For this reason, it is more accurate to emphasize the strength of the parent–child relationship than to suggest that children's outcomes depend mainly on which parent they live with.

Most children in one-parent households continue to live with their mother. Census data indicate that in 2022, about 78% of custodial parents were mothers and about 22% were fathers. Even so, research consistently shows that children's well-being after divorce is improved by strong parent–child bonds, reduced exposure to conflict, stable routines, and adequate economic resources (Shrider & Bijou, 2025).

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12.10: Remarriage, Repartnering, and Blended Families

Exploring Remarriage and Blended Families

Divorce and widowhood do not necessarily mark the end of marriage or family formation. Many adults go on to remarry, re-partner, and create new family structures that include step-parents, step-siblings, half-siblings, and children moving between households. Remarriage and blended families show how family life is not a single fixed form, but an ongoing process of reorganization.

Remarriage

Remarriage is a legal marriage that occurs after one or both spouses have ended a previous marriage through divorce or widowhood. Remarriage is a common feature of U.S. family life. Using marital history data from the American Community Survey (ACS), the Census Bureau estimated that about 15% of currently married couples include one spouse in a second marriage and the other in a first marriage, while about 9% include two spouses who are both in their second marriage (Lewis & Kreider, 2015).

Most remarriages occur after divorce rather than widowhood. Kreider reported that 91% of remarriages followed divorce, compared with 9% that followed the death of a spouse. More recently, Pew reports that about two-thirds of ever-divorced Americans have remarried, with men slightly more likely than women to do so (Hays, 2025).

A National Center for Health Statistics report indicates that second marriages are more likely to end than first marriages. By the 10th anniversary, about 33% of first marriages had ended in separation or divorce, compared with about 39% of second marriages (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Sociologists suggest that this higher risk reflects, in part, the greater complexity many remarried couples face, including step-family dynamics, ongoing ties to ex-spouses through co-parenting, and the financial and emotional strain of rebuilding family routines after a prior marital disruption. In addition, individuals who have already experienced divorce may view it as a more familiar or manageable option if a later marriage becomes unhappy or unstable.

Remarriage—whether a second, third, or later marriage—can look quite different from a first marriage because partners often enter the relationship with more life experience, established routines, prior obligations, and sometimes children. As a result, remarried couples may be less likely to navigate some of the "classic" first-marriage milestones, such as gaining parental approval, deciding whether premarital sex is acceptable, or starting a family for the first time. Instead, they are often more likely to focus on blending lives that already have history, responsibilities, and emotional ties beyond the new couple relationship.

Blended Families

A blended family, also known as a step-family, is created when a new marriage or partnership brings children from a prior relationship into the household. In these families, a child may gain a stepparent and may also gain step-siblings or half-siblings. Blended families can form in several ways: one partner may have children from a prior marriage, a prior cohabiting relationship, or a period of single parenthood. Step-children can be any age, from infants to adults.

When a child maintains ongoing ties to a parent who lives elsewhere, the family may become binuclear. This means the child's life is organized around two connected family households—one in each parent's home—rather than a single nuclear family unit. This arrangement can expand children's networks of care, but it can also require families to coordinate schedules, discipline, holidays, finances, and emotional expectations across households.

Family complexity is especially common after divorce and remarriage. A Pew Research Center analysis of federal data found that most adults who have divorced eventually remarry, and among divorced adults who are currently remarried, 46% have had a child with their new spouse. In other words, remarriage often creates households that include children from prior relationships as well as shared children with a current spouse (Hays, 2025).

Research cautions that forming a blended or step-family does not automatically reduce stress for children. Although remarriage can bring greater economic stability, step-families often face adjustment challenges, such as negotiating new roles, discipline expectations, household rules, and family boundaries. These transitions can increase interpersonal conflict, especially when children feel caught between households or when expectations about parenting are unclear (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

Divorce does not necessarily lead children to reject the idea of marriage and family life, but it can shape the kinds of families they experience and the challenges those families face. Blended families often take on added stress as households combine children from current and previous relationships, and parents may bring different expectations and discipline styles into the new family system (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). At the same time, survey evidence suggests that many adolescents continue to place a high value on marriage. Using Monitoring the Future data from the University of Michigan, Brown reports that roughly three-quarters of high school seniors from 1985 to 1999 said that having a good marriage and family life was "extremely important" (Brown, 2000).

Remarriage in Later Life

Remarriage and re-partnering also matter in later life, especially as more adults experience gray divorce, widowhood, or long-term singlehood after midlife. Using longitudinal data on U.S. adults born before 1960, research found that later-life marital dissolution is linked to increased depressive symptoms, although the pattern differs for gray divorce and widowhood (Moore, 2019). Those who divorced reported the highest levels of depressive symptoms, yet the authors emphasize that widowhood is generally a more serious transition than divorce, in part because it is involuntary and involves the death of a spouse. Depressive symptoms returned to baseline in about half the time for gray divorcees compared with widowed adults.

One reason may be that gray divorcees were much more likely to re-partner. Gray divorcees were about three times as likely to remarry as widowed adults and re-partnering helped offset negative mental health impacts for both groups (Moore, 2019). These findings suggest that remarriage in later life can provide emotional support, companionship, and renewed family connection.

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12.11: Conclusion

Concluding Remarks

Looking at divorce sociologically means moving beyond simple claims, such as "divorce is rising" or "divorce is bad." Instead, it requires asking what is being measured, who is most affected, and under what conditions divorce occurs. Divorce patterns reflect broader social forces, including economic change, shifting gender roles, cultural expectations for marriage, and evolving legal rules governing how relationships can be ended.

Taken together, the research suggests that divorce is not a single, uniform event, but a process with different pathways and outcomes. For some families, divorce can reduce exposure to chronic conflict or violence and create a path toward greater stability. For others, it can bring financial strain, disrupted routines, and emotional stress, especially when conflict remains high or when economic resources are limited. Examining custody arrangements, co-parenting, remarriage, and blended families helps show how families reorganize after a marital split. Ultimately, this chapter highlights that divorce is both a personal turning point and a social process.

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INDEX

A

abortion rights
9.4: Reproductive Choice

abuse
11.1: Learning Objectives
11.14: Conclusion
11.3: Understanding Family Violence and Abuse

academic achievement
10.6: Parenting in LGBTQ+ Families

acceptance
6.6: Heteronormativity and Cisnormativity

accomplishment of natural growth
5.9: Social Class, Parenting, and the Reproduction of Inequality

accountability
11.2: Introduction

achieved status
1.5: Statuses, Roles, and Family Groups

activism
11.8: Anti-Violence Activism, #MeToo, and Social Change
3.11: Feminism
6.7: The Lavender Scare, Stonewall, and the Policing of Sexuality
6.8: LGBTQ+ Activism, Pride, and Queer Joy
6.9: The HIV/AIDS Pandemic

adolescents
10.10: Parenting in the Age of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

adoption
1.3: Definitions of Marriage and Family
2.6: Same-Sex Couples and LGBTQ+ Families
9: Childlessness, Childfree Lives, and Pathways to Parenthood
9.11: Conclusion
9.2: Introduction
9.5: Pathways to Parenthood
9.8: Adoption

adoption statistics
9.8: Adoption

adoption types
9.1: Learning Objectives

adoptive families
9.8: Adoption

adult intimacy
8.5: Family Households and Modern Marriage Patterns

adults
12.2: Introduction

adverse childhood experiences
11.9: Child Abuse and Neglect

advocacy
6.12: Marriage Equality
6.13: Conclusion

African American
4.2: Introduction

African American families
4.9: African American Families

age at marriage
12.6: Social Patterns in Divorce

AI companions
7.9: AI Companions and the Changing Meaning of Intimacy

AIDS
6.9: The HIV/AIDS Pandemic

altruistic surrogacy
9.7: Surrogacy

American life
8.11: Conclusion

anthropology
4.3: Questioning Biological Definitions of Race

apps
7.8: Dating Apps and Digital Courtship

arranged marriage
8.6: Global Variations in Marriage

artificial intelligence
10: Parenting in Contemporary Society
10.10: Parenting in the Age of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

ascribed status
1.5: Statuses, Roles, and Family Groups

asexual
6.4: Glossary of Sexual Orientation and Related Terms

Asian American
4.2: Introduction
4.8: Asian American Families

Asian American family experiences
4.1: Learning Objectives

Asian immigrants
4.8: Asian American Families

assisted reproduction
9.5: Pathways to Parenthood

assisted reproductive technologies
9.2: Introduction

assisted reproductive technology
9.6: In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)

at risk of divorce
12.4: Measuring Divorce

attachment
11.12: Intergenerational Trauma and the Effects of Violence Across Generations

attraction
6.13: Conclusion
7: Attraction, Love, and Relationship Initiation
7.10: Conclusion
7.2: Introduction

Attraction Factors
7.5: Social Factors in Relationship Formation

attraction patterns
7.3: Explaining Attraction - Evolutionary and Sociocultural Perspectives

authoritarian
10.5: Parenting Practices, Styles, and Ideologies

authoritative
10.5: Parenting Practices, Styles, and Ideologies

B

baby boomers
1.9: The Study of Demography

bamboo ceiling
4.8: Asian American Families

basic needs
5: Social Class
5.6: Standard of Living, Poverty, and Basic Needs

beauty standards
7.4: The Role of Physical Attractiveness

behavioral adjustment
10.6: Parenting in LGBTQ+ Families

behavioral effects
11.12: Intergenerational Trauma and the Effects of Violence Across Generations

belonging
4.5: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity

benefits
8.9: The Marriage Benefit Imbalance

bigamy
2.4: Polygamy and Consensual Non-Monogamy

binary gender
3.6: Doing Gender

biological characteristics
3.3: Defining Sex and Gender

biological clock
9.2: Introduction

biological clocks
9.1: Learning Objectives

biological definitions
4.3: Questioning Biological Definitions of Race

biological explanations of race
4.1: Learning Objectives

biological forces
7.2: Introduction

biological reproduction
9.11: Conclusion

biological sex
3.7: Sex Assignment and Intersex Variations

birth control pill
9.4: Reproductive Choice

bisexual
6.4: Glossary of Sexual Orientation and Related Terms
6.5: Patterns of LGBTQ+ Identification

Black identity
4.9: African American Families

blended
12.2: Introduction

blended families
12: Divorce and Remarriage
12.10: Remarriage, Repartnering, and Blended Families
12.11: Conclusion
2: Diversity in Family Life
2.1: Learning Objectives
2.10: Blended Families
2.12: Conclusion

blended family
1.4: Different Types of Family Structures

bodily autonomy
9.4: Reproductive Choice

border security
4.10: Immigration and Family Life

bullying
6.11: LGBTQ+ Youth, Families, and Inclusion in Schools

C

C. Wright Mills
1.8: The Sociological Imagination and Family Life
campus culture
11.7: Sexual Violence
caregiver
11.11: Elder Abuse and Neglect
caregivers
10.3: The Functions of Parenting
caregiving
1.11: Family-Focused Frameworks
3.12: The Gendered Division of Household Labor
3.14: Conclusion
8.9: The Marriage Benefit Imbalance
caregiving arrangements
2.11: Foster Families
caregiving labor
10.4: Sociological Perspectives on Parenting
caregiving responsibilities
1.4: Different Types of Family Structures
10.7: Working Parents, Childcare, and Family Life
casual dating
7.7: Shifts in Modern Courtship
change
12.2: Introduction
child abuse
11.1: Learning Objectives
11.14: Conclusion
11.2: Introduction
11.9: Child Abuse and Neglect
2.11: Foster Families
child adjustment
12.9: The Impact of Divorce
child custody
12: Divorce and Remarriage
12.1: Learning Objectives
12.3: Divorce and the Legal Process
12.8: Child Custody, Parenting Plans, and Co-Parenting
child development
10.11: Conclusion
10.2: Introduction
10.3: The Functions of Parenting
10.5: Parenting Practices, Styles, and Ideologies
10.6: Parenting in LGBTQ+ Families
10.7: Working Parents, Childcare, and Family Life
child neglect
11.9: Child Abuse and Neglect
child sexual abuse
11.10: Incest and Sibling Sexual Abuse
child support
12.3: Divorce and the Legal Process
child visitation
12.8: Child Custody, Parenting Plans, and Co-Parenting
child welfare
2.11: Foster Families
childbearing
5.7: Social Class and Family Formation
9.9: Demographic Patterns of Fertility and Family Formation
childcare
10: Parenting in Contemporary Society
10.11: Conclusion
10.7: Working Parents, Childcare, and Family Life
childfree
9.11: Conclusion
9.3: Childlessness and Childfree Lives
childlessness
9.11: Conclusion
9.2: Introduction
9.3: Childlessness and Childfree Lives
children
10.10: Parenting in the Age of Artificial Intelligence (AI)
12.2: Introduction
children and divorce
12.9: The Impact of Divorce
children outcomes
8.8: Marriage and Well-Being
children's development
10.1: Learning Objectives
cisnormativity
6.1: Learning Objectives
class position
5.5: Social Mobility
coerced sterilization
9.4: Reproductive Choice
coercion
11.3: Understanding Family Violence and Abuse
cognitive outcomes
10.7: Working Parents, Childcare, and Family Life
cohabitation
2: Diversity in Family Life
2.1: Learning Objectives
2.12: Conclusion
2.2: Introduction
2.5: Cohabitation
7.10: Conclusion
8.3: Marriage as a Social Construction
8.5: Family Households and Modern Marriage Patterns
cohort estimates
12.4: Measuring Divorce
college
7.8: Dating Apps and Digital Courtship
colonization
4.11: Conclusion
coming out
6.10: LGBTQ+ Families, Family Acceptance, and Family Rejection
commercial surrogacy
9.7: Surrogacy
commitment
2.7: Living Apart Together (LAT)
7.6: Theoretical Models of Love
communication patterns
11.12: Intergenerational Trauma and the Effects of Violence Across Generations
community
4.5: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity
6.8: LGBTQ+ Activism, Pride, and Queer Joy
community activism
4.6: Indigenous and Native American Families
community factors
5.6: Standard of Living, Poverty, and Basic Needs
community networks
4.9: African American Families
community support
4.7: Hispanic and Latino Families
companionate love
7.6: Theoretical Models of Love
comprehensive sex education
6.2: Introduction
concerted cultivation
5.9: Social Class, Parenting, and the Reproduction of Inequality
conclusion
7: Attraction, Love, and Relationship Initiation
conflict
12.2: Introduction
conflict theory
1.10: Theoretical Perspectives on the Family
10.4: Sociological Perspectives on Parenting
5.1: Learning Objectives
5.8: Theoretical Perspectives on Social Stratification
consent
11.1: Learning Objectives
11.10: Incest and Sibling Sexual Abuse
11.7: Sexual Violence
contemporary family life
1.7: Contemporary Family Life
2.10: Blended Families
2.12: Conclusion
contemporary society
1.1: Learning Objectives
10: Parenting in Contemporary Society
couples
2.5: Cohabitation
2.7: Living Apart Together (LAT)
8.8: Marriage and Well-Being
courtship
7.7: Shifts in Modern Courtship
7.8: Dating Apps and Digital Courtship
courtship norms
7.1: Learning Objectives
crude divorce rate
12.4: Measuring Divorce
cultural capital
5.9: Social Class, Parenting, and the Reproduction of Inequality
cultural change
4.10: Immigration and Family Life
cultural conditioning
7.2: Introduction
cultural context
4.3: Questioning Biological Definitions of Race
cultural expectations
10.2: Introduction
cultural expression
4.5: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity
cultural inequality
5.5: Social Mobility
cultural norms
10.3: The Functions of Parenting
3.5: The Social Construction of Gender
6.13: Conclusion
7.3: Explaining Attraction - Evolutionary and Sociocultural Perspectives
7.4: The Role of Physical Attractiveness
8.4: Marriage as a Social Institution
cultural resilience
4.6: Indigenous and Native American Families

cultural roles
3.4: The Gender Binary

cultural shifts
12.5: A Brief History of U.S. Divorce Trends

cultural taboos
11.10: Incest and Sibling Sexual Abuse

cultural traditions
4.7: Hispanic and Latino Families
8.6: Global Variations in Marriage

cultural values
8.10: The Sociology of Weddings

culture
1.12: Conclusion
1.8: The Sociological Imagination and Family Life
3.14: Conclusion
3.2: Introduction
4: Race and Ethnicity
4.5: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity

custodial parents
12.8: Child Custody, Parenting Plans, and Co-Parenting

custody arrangements
12.11: Conclusion

custody disputes
12.8: Child Custody, Parenting Plans, and Co-Parenting

D

dating
6.2: Introduction
7.2: Introduction
7.6: Theoretical Models of Love
7.8: Dating Apps and Digital Courtship

dating apps
7.1: Learning Objectives
7.9: AI Companions and the Changing Meaning of Intimacy

dating norms
7.7: Shifts in Modern Courtship

defining sex and gender
3: Sex and Gender

demographic measures
12.4: Measuring Divorce

demographic patterns
2.8: Singlehood

demographic trends
8.1: Learning Objectives
8.5: Family Households and Modern Marriage Patterns

demographic_patterns
9: Childlessness, Childfree Lives, and Pathways to Parenthood

demographics
6.5: Patterns of LGBTQ+ Identification

demography
1.9: The Study of Demography
9.9: Demographic Patterns of Fertility and Family Formation

desire
7.2: Introduction

differences of sex development
3.7: Sex Assignment and Intersex Variations

digital
7.8: Dating Apps and Digital Courtship

digital age
10.9: Parenting in the Age of Social Media

digital literacy
10.10: Parenting in the Age of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Digital Media
10.11: Conclusion

digital parenting
10.9: Parenting in the Age of Social Media

digital relationships
7.9: AI Companions and the Changing Meaning of Intimacy

digital technology
7.7: Shifts in Modern Courtship

discrimination
4.8: Asian American Families
6.11: LGBTQ+ Youth, Families, and Inclusion in Schools
6.12: Marriage Equality
6.6: Heteronormativity and Cisnormativity
6.8: LGBTQ+ Activism, Pride, and Queer Joy

disorders of sex development
3.7: Sex Assignment and Intersex Variations

diverse family forms
1.1: Learning Objectives

diverse identities
4.5: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity

diversity
2.2: Introduction
2.3: Exploring Diversity in Family Life
4.2: Introduction
6.13: Conclusion

diversity in family life
2: Diversity in Family Life

divorce
1.11: Family-Focused Frameworks
12.1: Learning Objectives
12.10: Remarriage, Repartnering, and Blended Families
12.11: Conclusion
12.2: Introduction
12.3: Divorce and the Legal Process
12.5: A Brief History of U.S. Divorce Trends
12.6: Social Patterns in Divorce
12.7: Why Marriages End—Common Pathways to Divorce
5.7: Social Class and Family Formation

divorce patterns
5.1: Learning Objectives

divorce rate
12.1: Learning Objectives
12.4: Measuring Divorce

divorce rates
8.6: Global Variations in Marriage

divorce risk
12.1: Learning Objectives

Dobbs v. Jackson
9.4: Reproductive Choice

doing gender
3.1: Learning Objectives
3.6: Doing Gender

domestic labor
8.9: The Marriage Benefit Imbalance

domestic violence
11.5: Patterns of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Across Gender and Sexuality
11.6: Effects of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) on Survivors, Children, and Families
11.8: Anti-Violence Activism, #MeToo, and Social Change
3.11: Feminism

domestic work
3.12: The Gendered Division of Household Labor

donor eggs
9.6: In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)

downward mobility
5.5: Social Mobility

dramaturgical perspective
3.6: Doing Gender

E

early adulthood
12.10: Remarriage, Repartnering, and Blended Families

economic capital
5.9: Social Class, Parenting, and the Reproduction of Inequality

economic factors
12.5: A Brief History of U.S. Divorce Trends
2.1: Learning Objectives

economic hardship
5.5: Social Mobility

economic independence
12.6: Social Patterns in Divorce

economic inequality
2.9: Single-Parent Families
3.11: Feminism
5.3: Social Stratification and Family Life
5.4: Social Class and Family Inequality
5.6: Standard of Living, Poverty, and Basic Needs

economic insecurity
12.7: Why Marriages End—Common Pathways to Divorce
5.5: Social Mobility

economic instability
5.7: Social Class and Family Formation

economic opportunities
4.8: Asian American Families

economic preferences
2.5: Cohabitation

economic security
5.8: Theoretical Perspectives on Social Stratification
8.4: Marriage as a Social Institution

economic stability
12.9: The Impact of Divorce

economic strain
10.11: Conclusion

economic stress
1.11: Family-Focused Frameworks

education
10.3: The Functions of Parenting
12.6: Social Patterns in Divorce
3.10: Gender Inequality and Patriarchy
4.7: Hispanic and Latino Families
4.8: Asian American Families
5: Social Class
5.10: Conclusion
5.3: Social Stratification and Family Life
5.6: Standard of Living, Poverty, and Basic Needs
6.11: LGBTQ+ Youth, Families, and Inclusion in Schools
6.9: The HIV/AIDS Pandemic
9.9: Demographic Patterns of Fertility and Family Formation

education access
5.8: Theoretical Perspectives on Social Stratification
education system
5.2: Introduction
educational attainment
5.4: Social Class and Family Inequality
educational inequality
5.5: Social Mobility
educational outcomes
5.9: Social Class, Parenting, and the Reproduction of Inequality
elder abuse
11: Family Violence and Abuse
11.1: Learning Objectives
11.11: Elder Abuse and Neglect
11.14: Conclusion
11.2: Introduction
embryo transfer
9.6: In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)
emotional abuse
11.4: Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)
11.9: Child Abuse and Neglect
emotional advantages
8.8: Marriage and Well-Being
emotional attraction
6.3: Sexual Orientation as a Spectrum
emotional benefits
8.11: Conclusion
emotional closeness
7.6: Theoretical Models of Love
emotional companionship
8.4: Marriage as a Social Institution
emotional complexities
9.7: Surrogacy
emotional connection
7.5: Social Factors in Relationship Formation
emotional effects
11.12: Intergenerational Trauma and the Effects of Violence Across Generations
11.6: Effects of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) on Survivors, Children, and Families
emotional expression
3.9: The Policing of Gender and Sexuality
emotional fulfillment
8.3: Marriage as a Social Construction
emotional labor
3.12: The Gendered Division of Household Labor
8.10: The Sociology of Weddings
emotional regulation
11.12: Intergenerational Trauma and the Effects of Violence Across Generations
emotional stress
12.11: Conclusion
emotional support
10.10: Parenting in the Age of Artificial Intelligence (AI)
10.3: The Functions of Parenting
11.3: Understanding Family Violence and Abuse
2.11: Foster Families
7.9: AI Companions and the Changing Meaning of Intimacy
emotional wellbeing
2.6: Same-Sex Couples and LGBTQ+ Families
2.8: Singlehood
employment
10.7: Working Parents, Childcare, and Family Life
3.10: Gender Inequality and Patriarchy
3.13: Gender and the Labor Market
5.10: Conclusion
endogamy
4.6: Indigenous and Native American Families
8.2: Introduction
8.4: Marriage as a Social Institution
equality
6.12: Marriage Equality
6.8: LGBTQ+ Activism, Pride, and Queer Joy
ethical issues
9.7: Surrogacy
ethnic identity
4.7: Hispanic and Latino Families
ethnicity
4: Race and Ethnicity
4.11: Conclusion
4.2: Introduction
4.3: Questioning Biological Definitions of Race
4.5: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity
evolutionary explanations
7.1: Learning Objectives
evolutionary perspective
7: Attraction, Love, and Relationship Initiation
evolutionary perspectives
7.2: Introduction
evolutionary theory
7.3: Explaining Attraction - Evolutionary and Sociocultural Perspectives
Exchange Theory
7.5: Social Factors in Relationship Formation
exogamy
4.6: Indigenous and Native American Families
8.4: Marriage as a Social Institution
exploitation
11.11: Elder Abuse and Neglect
exploring
6.6: Heteronormativity and Cisnormativity
7.8: Dating Apps and Digital Courtship
exploring forms of capital
5.9: Social Class, Parenting, and the Reproduction of Inequality
exploring marriage
8.3: Marriage as a Social Construction
Exploring Social Factors
7.5: Social Factors in Relationship Formation
extended family
1.4: Different Types of Family Structures

F

facial symmetry
7.4: The Role of Physical Attractiveness
Familiarity
7.5: Social Factors in Relationship Formation
families
1.12: Conclusion
1.6: A Historical Context for Today's Families
3.14: Conclusion
4.7: Hispanic and Latino Families
4.8: Asian American Families
6.11: LGBTQ+ Youth, Families, and Inclusion in Schools
6.2: Introduction
family
1: Introduction to Marriage and Family
1.1: Learning Objectives
1.10: Theoretical Perspectives on the Family
1.11: Family-Focused Frameworks
1.2: Introduction
1.3: Definitions of Marriage and Family
10.10: Parenting in the Age of Artificial Intelligence (AI)
10.11: Conclusion
12.2: Introduction
2.3: Exploring Diversity in Family Life
4.11: Conclusion
9.5: Pathways to Parenthood
family acceptance
6: Sexuality and Sexual Orientation
6.1: Learning Objectives
6.10: LGBTQ+ Families, Family Acceptance, and Family Rejection
family benefits
8.8: Marriage and Well-Being
family change
1.6: A Historical Context for Today's Families
12.4: Measuring Divorce
family disruption
10.11: Conclusion
family diversity
1.12: Conclusion
1.4: Different Types of Family Structures
1.6: A Historical Context for Today's Families
10.11: Conclusion
2.11: Foster Families
2.7: Living Apart Together (LAT)
family dynamics
1.5: Statuses, Roles, and Family Groups
1.7: Contemporary Family Life
1.8: The Sociological Imagination and Family Life
10.5: Parenting Practices, Styles, and Ideologies
10.8: The Challenges of Parenting in Contemporary Society
11.10: Incest and Sibling Sexual Abuse
12.10: Remarriage, Repartnering, and Blended Families
12.11: Conclusion
12.9: The Impact of Divorce
2.10: Blended Families
2.6: Same-Sex Couples and LGBTQ+ Families
4.7: Hispanic and Latino Families
8.9: The Marriage Benefit Imbalance
family expectations
3.4: The Gender Binary
family experiences
1.2: Introduction
family formation
5: Social Class
5.7: Social Class and Family Formation
7.10: Conclusion
8.10: The Sociology of Weddings
9.11: Conclusion
9.3: Childlessness and Childfree Lives
9.8: Adoption
9.9: Demographic Patterns of Fertility and Family Formation
family forms
2.12: Conclusion
2.3: Exploring Diversity in Family Life
family groups
1: Introduction to Marriage and Family
family households
8: Marriage
8.5: Family Households and Modern Marriage Patterns

family income
- 10.7: Working Parents, Childcare, and Family Life

family inequality
- 5: Social Class

family law
- 12.8: Child Custody, Parenting Plans, and Co-Parenting
- 8.7: The Regulation of Marriage - Interracial and Same-Sex Marriage

family life
- 1.12: Conclusion
- 1.8: The Sociological Imagination and Family Life
- 1.9: The Study of Demography
- 10: Parenting in Contemporary Society
- 10.2: Introduction
- 10.4: Sociological Perspectives on Parenting
- 10.7: Working Parents, Childcare, and Family Life
- 12.10: Remarriage, Repartnering, and Blended Families
- 2.2: Introduction
- 4: Race and Ethnicity
- 4.10: Immigration and Family Life
- 4.2: Introduction
- 5: Social Class
- 5.10: Conclusion
- 5.2: Introduction
- 5.3: Social Stratification and Family Life

family networks
- 2.8: Singlehood

family patterns
- 8.6: Global Variations in Marriage

family policy
- 2.9: Single-Parent Families

family relationships
- 1.1: Learning Objectives
- 10.1: Learning Objectives
- 10.2: Introduction
- 10.6: Parenting in LGBTQ+ Families
- 11.12: Intergenerational Trauma and the Effects of Violence Across Generations
- 11.2: Introduction
- 11.9: Child Abuse and Neglect

family roles
- 1.2: Introduction
- 10.3: The Functions of Parenting
- 10.4: Sociological Perspectives on Parenting
- 3.2: Introduction

family sociology
- 3.12: The Gendered Division of Household Labor
- 9.9: Demographic Patterns of Fertility and Family Formation

family stability
- 12.6: Social Patterns in Divorce

family structure
- 1.7: Contemporary Family Life
- 10.2: Introduction
- 12.10: Remarriage, Repartnering, and Blended Families
- 2.12: Conclusion
- 2.9: Single-Parent Families

family structures
- 1: Introduction to Marriage and Family
- 1.1: Learning Objectives
- 1.2: Introduction
- 1.4: Different Types of Family Structures
- 1.6: A Historical Context for Today's Families
- 2.1: Learning Objectives

family support
- 2.6: Same-Sex Couples and LGBTQ+ Families
- 6.10: LGBTQ+ Families, Family Acceptance, and Family Rejection

family systems
- 11.12: Intergenerational Trauma and the Effects of Violence Across Generations

family therapy
- 1.11: Family-Focused Frameworks

family trends
- 1.7: Contemporary Family Life

family variations
- 2.10: Blended Families

family violence
- 1.11: Family-Focused Frameworks
- 11: Family Violence and Abuse
- 11.1: Learning Objectives
- 11.13: Theoretical Perspectives on Family Violence and Sexual Violence
- 11.14: Conclusion
- 11.3: Understanding Family Violence and Abuse

femininity
- 3.5: The Social Construction of Gender
- 3.6: Doing Gender
- 3.9: The Policing of Gender and Sexuality

feminism
- 11.13: Theoretical Perspectives on Family Violence and Sexual Violence
- 11.8: Anti-Violence Activism, #MeToo, and Social Change
- 3: Sex and Gender
- 3.11: Feminism
- 3.13: Gender and the Labor Market
- 3.14: Conclusion
- 3.2: Introduction

feminist movement
- 12.5: A Brief History of U.S. Divorce Trends

feminist perspectives
- 10.4: Sociological Perspectives on Parenting

feminist theory
- 1.10: Theoretical Perspectives on the Family

fertility
- 5.7: Social Class and Family Formation
- 9: Childlessness, Childfree Lives, and Pathways to Parenthood
- 9.11: Conclusion
- 9.3: Childlessness and Childfree Lives
- 9.5: Pathways to Parenthood

fertility patterns
- 9.1: Learning Objectives
- 9.2: Introduction

fertility trends
- 9.9: Demographic Patterns of Fertility and Family Formation

financial abuse
- 11.4: Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

financial benefits
- 8.11: Conclusion

financial consequences
- 11.6: Effects of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) on Survivors, Children, and Families
- 12.9: The Impact of Divorce

financial security
- 5.4: Social Class and Family Inequality

financial stability
- 8.8: Marriage and Well-Being

financial strain
- 12.11: Conclusion

fluid identity
- 6.3: Sexual Orientation as a Spectrum

fluidity
- 6.13: Conclusion

food insecurity
- 5.6: Standard of Living, Poverty, and Basic Needs

foster care
- 2.11: Foster Families
- 9.8: Adoption

foster families
- 2: Diversity in Family Life
- 2.11: Foster Families

friendship
- 7.9: AI Companions and the Changing Meaning of Intimacy

G

gay
- 6.4: Glossary of Sexual Orientation and Related Terms
- 6.5: Patterns of LGBTQ+ Identification

gender
- 1.8: The Sociological Imagination and Family Life
- 11.5: Patterns of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Across Gender and Sexuality
- 3.13: Gender and the Labor Market
- 3.14: Conclusion
- 3.2: Introduction
- 3.3: Defining Sex and Gender
- 3.5: The Social Construction of Gender
- 3.6: Doing Gender
- 3.9: The Policing of Gender and Sexuality
- 6.2: Introduction
- 6.5: Patterns of LGBTQ+ Identification
- 8.9: The Marriage Benefit Imbalance

gender and labor market
- 3: Sex and Gender

gender binary
- 3: Sex and Gender
- 3.4: The Gender Binary

gender differences
- 2.8: Singlehood
- 7.3: Explaining Attraction - Evolutionary and Sociocultural Perspectives
- 7.4: The Role of Physical Attractiveness

gender dimensions
- 3.1: Learning Objectives

gender diversity
- 3.4: The Gender Binary
- 6.3: Sexual Orientation as a Spectrum

gender division of labor
- 3.12: The Gendered Division of Household Labor

gender dynamics
- 8.8: Marriage and Well-Being

gender dysphoria
- 3.8: Gender Identity

gender equality
- 12.3: Divorce and the Legal Process

gender expectations
- 3.14: Conclusion

gender expression
- 3.3: Defining Sex and Gender
- 3.8: Gender Identity

gender identity
- 3: Sex and Gender
- 3.1: Learning Objectives
- 3.10: Gender Inequality and Patriarchy
- 3.3: Defining Sex and Gender
- 3.4: The Gender Binary
- 3.5: The Social Construction of Gender
- 3.7: Sex Assignment and Intersex Variations
- 3.8: Gender Identity
- 3.9: The Policing of Gender and Sexuality
- 6.13: Conclusion
- 6.6: Heteronormativity and Cisnormativity

gender inequality
- 11.5: Patterns of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Across Gender and Sexuality
- 11.6: Effects of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) on Survivors, Children, and Families
- 11.7: Sexual Violence
- 3: Sex and Gender
- 3.1: Learning Objectives
- 3.10: Gender Inequality and Patriarchy
- 3.11: Feminism
- 3.12: The Gendered Division of Household Labor

gender narrative
- 9.1: Learning Objectives

gender norms
- 10.7: Working Parents, Childcare, and Family Life
- 3.9: The Policing of Gender and Sexuality

gender performance
- 3.6: Doing Gender

gender roles
- 1.10: Theoretical Perspectives on the Family
- 1.6: A Historical Context for Today's Families
- 1.7: Contemporary Family Life
- 12.11: Conclusion
- 12.5: A Brief History of U.S. Divorce Trends
- 3.13: Gender and the Labor Market
- 3.3: Defining Sex and Gender
- 3.5: The Social Construction of Gender
- 4.7: Hispanic and Latino Families
- 8.10: The Sociology of Weddings
- 9.3: Childlessness and Childfree Lives

gender socialization
- 3.5: The Social Construction of Gender

gender stereotypes
- 3.5: The Social Construction of Gender

gendered division of household labor
- 3: Sex and Gender

gendered division of labor
- 3.1: Learning Objectives

gendered expectations
- 8.11: Conclusion

generation X
- 1.9: The Study of Demography

generational cohort
- 1.9: The Study of Demography

gestational carrier
- 9.7: Surrogacy

global variations
- 8: Marriage

glossary
- 6.4: Glossary of Sexual Orientation and Related Terms

guidance
- 10.3: The Functions of Parenting

H

halo effect
- 7.4: The Role of Physical Attractiveness

hate
- 6.6: Heteronormativity and Cisnormativity

healing
- 11.2: Introduction

health
- 4.7: Hispanic and Latino Families
- 5.10: Conclusion
- 8.8: Marriage and Well-Being

health benefits
- 8.11: Conclusion

health crisis
- 6.9: The HIV/AIDS Pandemic

health disparities
- 4.9: African American Families

health outcomes
- 9.10: Racial Disparities in Maternal Health Outcomes

healthcare
- 3.10: Gender Inequality and Patriarchy

healthcare access
- 9.10: Racial Disparities in Maternal Health Outcomes

healthcare inequities
- 9.10: Racial Disparities in Maternal Health Outcomes

heritage
- 4.5: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity

Heterogamy
- 7.5: Social Factors in Relationship Formation

heteronormativity
- 6: Sexuality and Sexual Orientation
- 6.1: Learning Objectives

hispanic
- 4.7: Hispanic and Latino Families

historical context
- 1: Introduction to Marriage and Family
- 1.6: A Historical Context for Today's Families
- 4.3: Questioning Biological Definitions of Race

historical forces African American families
- 4.1: Learning Objectives

historical overview
- 2.11: Foster Families

historical periods
- 8.3: Marriage as a Social Construction

history
- 1.12: Conclusion
- 12: Divorce and Remarriage
- 12.5: A Brief History of U.S. Divorce Trends
- 6.7: The Lavender Scare, Stonewall, and the Policing of Sexuality
- 6.8: LGBTQ+ Activism, Pride, and Queer Joy

HIV
- 6.9: The HIV/AIDS Pandemic

HIV/AIDS pandemic
- 6.1: Learning Objectives

homelessness
- 5.6: Standard of Living, Poverty, and Basic Needs

Homogamy
- 7.5: Social Factors in Relationship Formation

hookup culture
- 7.7: Shifts in Modern Courtship

household
- 1.3: Definitions of Marriage and Family

household composition
- 5.7: Social Class and Family Formation

household labor
- 3.12: The Gendered Division of Household Labor

household statistics
- 8.5: Family Households and Modern Marriage Patterns

household structure
- 7.10: Conclusion

household structures
- 2.3: Exploring Diversity in Family Life

housing
- 5.10: Conclusion

human populations
- 1.9: The Study of Demography

human rights
- 3.7: Sex Assignment and Intersex Variations

human sexuality
- 6.13: Conclusion
- 6.2: Introduction

human variation
- 4.3: Questioning Biological Definitions of Race

I

identity
- 3.14: Conclusion
- 3.2: Introduction
- 4: Race and Ethnicity
- 4.5: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity
- 6.11: LGBTQ+ Youth, Families, and Inclusion in Schools
- 6.4: Glossary of Sexual Orientation and Related Terms
- 6.8: LGBTQ+ Activism, Pride, and Queer Joy
- 9.5: Pathways to Parenthood

identity formation
- 3.8: Gender Identity
- 4.4: Race as a Social Construct

ideological preferences
- 2.5: Cohabitation

ideologies
- 10.5: Parenting Practices, Styles, and Ideologies

immigrant families challenges
- 4.1: Learning Objectives

immigrants
- 4.10: Immigration and Family Life

immigration
- 4: Race and Ethnicity
- 4.10: Immigration and Family Life

immigration policies
- 4.11: Conclusion

impact of divorce
- 12.1: Learning Objectives
- 12.9: The Impact of Divorce

in vitro fertilization
- 9.11: Conclusion
- 9.2: Introduction
- 9.6: In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)

in_vitro_fertilization
- 9: Childlessness, Childfree Lives, and Pathways to Parenthood

incest
- 11: Family Violence and Abuse
- 11.10: Incest and Sibling Sexual Abuse
- 11.14: Conclusion

inclusion
6.11: LGBTQ+ Youth, Families, and Inclusion in Schools
Inclusion in Schools
6: Sexuality and Sexual Orientation
inclusive education
6.13: Conclusion
income
3.10: Gender Inequality and Patriarchy
5.10: Conclusion
9.9: Demographic Patterns of Fertility and Family Formation
independence
2.7: Living Apart Together (LAT)
2.8: Singlehood
indigenous
4.2: Introduction
4.6: Indigenous and Native American Families
Indigenous communities
4.1: Learning Objectives
indigenous families
4: Race and Ethnicity
Indigenous identity
4.3: Questioning Biological Definitions of Race
individual autonomy
8.6: Global Variations in Marriage
individual choice
8.2: Introduction
individual rights
12.3: Divorce and the Legal Process
individualism
1.1: Learning Objectives
1.7: Contemporary Family Life
individualized marriage
8.3: Marriage as a Social Construction
inequalities
4.11: Conclusion
inequality
1.12: Conclusion
10.2: Introduction
11.13: Theoretical Perspectives on Family Violence and Sexual Violence
3.13: Gender and the Labor Market
3.14: Conclusion
4.4: Race as a Social Construct
5.2: Introduction
5.3: Social Stratification and Family Life
5.4: Social Class and Family Inequality
5.8: Theoretical Perspectives on Social Stratification
5.9: Social Class, Parenting, and the Reproduction of Inequality
6.1: Learning Objectives
8.4: Marriage as a Social Institution
8.9: The Marriage Benefit Imbalance
infatuated love
7.6: Theoretical Models of Love
infertility
9.5: Pathways to Parenthood
9.6: In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)
9.7: Surrogacy
infidelity
12.7: Why Marriages End—Common Pathways to Divorce
informed consent
3.7: Sex Assignment and Intersex Variations
initial attraction
7.1: Learning Objectives
intended parents
9.7: Surrogacy
intergenerational trauma
11: Family Violence and Abuse
11.1: Learning Objectives
11.12: Intergenerational Trauma and the Effects of Violence Across Generations
international adoption
9.8: Adoption
Interpersonal Attraction
7.3: Explaining Attraction - Evolutionary and Sociocultural Perspectives
interracial marriage
8: Marriage
8.1: Learning Objectives
8.7: The Regulation of Marriage - Interracial and Same-Sex Marriage
intersectionality
1.10: Theoretical Perspectives on the Family
11.13: Theoretical Perspectives on Family Violence and Sexual Violence
3.11: Feminism
3.14: Conclusion
3.2: Introduction
3.9: The Policing of Gender and Sexuality
intersex
3.4: The Gender Binary
intersex variations
3.7: Sex Assignment and Intersex Variations
intimacy
7.2: Introduction
7.6: Theoretical Models of Love
7.7: Shifts in Modern Courtship
7.9: AI Companions and the Changing Meaning of Intimacy
intimate partner violence
1.6: A Historical Context for Today's Families
11: Family Violence and Abuse
11.1: Learning Objectives
11.14: Conclusion
11.2: Introduction
11.4: Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)
11.5: Patterns of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Across Gender and Sexuality
11.6: Effects of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) on Survivors, Children, and Families
11.7: Sexual Violence
12.7: Why Marriages End—Common Pathways to Divorce
intimate relationships
11.3: Understanding Family Violence and Abuse
intimidation
11.3: Understanding Family Violence and Abuse
introduction
2: Diversity in Family Life
4: Race and Ethnicity
7: Attraction, Love, and Relationship Initiation
IPV
11: Family Violence and Abuse
11.1: Learning Objectives
11.14: Conclusion
11.2: Introduction
11.4: Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)
11.5: Patterns of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Across Gender and Sexuality
11.6: Effects of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) on Survivors, Children, and Families
IVF
9: Childlessness, Childfree Lives, and Pathways to Parenthood
9.6: In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)
IVF access
9.1: Learning Objectives

J

justice
11.8: Anti-Violence Activism, #MeToo, and Social Change

K

Kinsey scale
6.3: Sexual Orientation as a Spectrum
kinship
4.6: Indigenous and Native American Families
4.9: African American Families
8.2: Introduction
8.4: Marriage as a Social Institution
9.7: Surrogacy
kinship adoption
9.8: Adoption
kinship networks
2.11: Foster Families
kinship systems family organization
4.1: Learning Objectives
kinship ties
7.10: Conclusion

L

labor
3.13: Gender and the Labor Market
labor market
5.2: Introduction
LAT
2.7: Living Apart Together (LAT)
latino
4.2: Introduction
4.7: Hispanic and Latino Families
Lawrence v. Texas
8.7: The Regulation of Marriage - Interracial and Same-Sex Marriage
learning
10.1: Learning Objectives
learning objectives
1: Introduction to Marriage and Family
10: Parenting in Contemporary Society
2: Diversity in Family Life
3: Sex and Gender
3.1: Learning Objectives
4: Race and Ethnicity
4.1: Learning Objectives
7: Attraction, Love, and Relationship Initiation
9.1: Learning Objectives
legal custody
12.8: Child Custody, Parenting Plans, and Co-Parenting
legal intervention
11.6: Effects of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) on Survivors, Children, and Families
legal issues
9.7: Surrogacy
legal process
12: Divorce and Remarriage
12.3: Divorce and the Legal Process
legal recognition
10.6: Parenting in LGBTQ+ Families
8.7: The Regulation of Marriage - Interracial and Same-Sex Marriage

legal rights
6.12: Marriage Equality

legal status
4.10: Immigration and Family Life

legal transition
3.8: Gender Identity

legislation
6.6: Heteronormativity and Cisnormativity

lesbian
6.4: Glossary of Sexual Orientation and Related Terms
6.5: Patterns of LGBTQ+ Identification

LGBTQ
11.8: Anti-Violence Activism, #MeToo, and Social Change
6.11: LGBTQ+ Youth, Families, and Inclusion in Schools
6.12: Marriage Equality
6.3: Sexual Orientation as a Spectrum
6.5: Patterns of LGBTQ+ Identification
6.6: Heteronormativity and Cisnormativity
6.8: LGBTQ+ Activism, Pride, and Queer Joy
6.9: The HIV/AIDS Pandemic
7.8: Dating Apps and Digital Courtship

LGBTQ families
10: Parenting in Contemporary Society
10.6: Parenting in LGBTQ+ Families
2.6: Same-Sex Couples and LGBTQ+ Families
6.10: LGBTQ+ Families, Family Acceptance, and Family Rejection

LGBTQ identification
6.2: Introduction

LGBTQ inclusion
6.2: Introduction

LGBTQ relationships
6.10: LGBTQ+ Families, Family Acceptance, and Family Rejection

LGBTQ rights
2.1: Learning Objectives
6.7: The Lavender Scare, Stonewall, and the Policing of Sexuality
8.7: The Regulation of Marriage - Interracial and Same-Sex Marriage

LGBTQ youth
2.6: Same-Sex Couples and LGBTQ+ Families

LGBTQ+
11.5: Patterns of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Across Gender and Sexuality
3.8: Gender Identity
3.9: The Policing of Gender and Sexuality
6.1: Learning Objectives
9.6: In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)

LGBTQ+ activism
6: Sexuality and Sexual Orientation
6.1: Learning Objectives

LGBTQ+ families
6: Sexuality and Sexual Orientation
9.9: Demographic Patterns of Fertility and Family Formation

LGBTQ+ rights
3.11: Feminism

LGBTQ+ Youth
6: Sexuality and Sexual Orientation

LGBTQIA
6.3: Sexual Orientation as a Spectrum

lifelong marriage
8.3: Marriage as a Social Construction

lifestyle choice
2.8: Singlehood

living apart together
2.7: Living Apart Together (LAT)

living together
2.5: Cohabitation

loneliness
7.9: AI Companions and the Changing Meaning of Intimacy

love
7.2: Introduction
8.2: Introduction

love marriage
8.6: Global Variations in Marriage

love models
7.1: Learning Objectives

love styles
7.6: Theoretical Models of Love

Loving v. Virginia
8.7: The Regulation of Marriage - Interracial and Same-Sex Marriage

M

male victims
11.5: Patterns of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Across Gender and Sexuality

marital dissolution
12.9: The Impact of Divorce

marital satisfaction
12.5: A Brief History of U.S. Divorce Trends
12.7: Why Marriages End—Common Pathways to Divorce
8.9: The Marriage Benefit Imbalance

market
3.13: Gender and the Labor Market

marriage
1: Introduction to Marriage and Family
1.1: Learning Objectives
1.2: Introduction
1.3: Definitions of Marriage and Family
1.7: Contemporary Family Life
12.5: A Brief History of U.S. Divorce Trends
12.7: Why Marriages End—Common Pathways to Divorce
2.12: Conclusion
2.2: Introduction
2.5: Cohabitation
2.8: Singlehood
5.7: Social Class and Family Formation
6.12: Marriage Equality
6.2: Introduction
7.10: Conclusion
8: Marriage
8.1: Learning Objectives
8.10: The Sociology of Weddings
8.11: Conclusion
8.2: Introduction
8.4: Marriage as a Social Institution
8.8: Marriage and Well-Being
8.9: The Marriage Benefit Imbalance

marriage equality
12.3: Divorce and the Legal Process
2.6: Same-Sex Couples and LGBTQ+ Families
6: Sexuality and Sexual Orientation
8.2: Introduction
8.7: The Regulation of Marriage - Interracial and Same-Sex Marriage

marriage health
8.1: Learning Objectives

marriage laws
8.1: Learning Objectives

marriage meaning
8.3: Marriage as a Social Construction

marriage patterns
5.1: Learning Objectives

marriage rates
8.11: Conclusion
8.5: Family Households and Modern Marriage Patterns

marriage satisfaction
8.6: Global Variations in Marriage

marriage stability
12.4: Measuring Divorce

masculinity
3.5: The Social Construction of Gender
3.6: Doing Gender
3.9: The Policing of Gender and Sexuality

master status
1.5: Statuses, Roles, and Family Groups

mate selection
8.4: Marriage as a Social Institution

Maternal Health
9.10: Racial Disparities in Maternal Health Outcomes

maternal mortality
9.10: Racial Disparities in Maternal Health Outcomes

maternal_health
9: Childlessness, Childfree Lives, and Pathways to Parenthood

matrilineal
4.6: Indigenous and Native American Families

measuring divorce
12: Divorce and Remarriage

media influence
7.4: The Role of Physical Attractiveness

mediation
12.3: Divorce and the Legal Process

medical interventions
9.5: Pathways to Parenthood

medical research
3.7: Sex Assignment and Intersex Variations
6.9: The HIV/AIDS Pandemic

medical transition
3.8: Gender Identity

mental health
10.10: Parenting in the Age of Artificial Intelligence (AI)
10.8: The Challenges of Parenting in Contemporary Society
10.9: Parenting in the Age of Social Media
11.12: Intergenerational Trauma and the Effects of Violence Across Generations
11.9: Child Abuse and Neglect
6.10: LGBTQ+ Families, Family Acceptance, and Family Rejection

meritocracy
5.2: Introduction
5.3: Social Stratification and Family Life

midlife transition
12.7: Why Marriages End—Common Pathways to Divorce

migration
4.10: Immigration and Family Life

Millennial family life
1.7: Contemporary Family Life

millennials
1.9: The Study of Demography

minority group
4.4: Race as a Social Construct

model minority
4.8: Asian American Families
model minority myth
4.1: Learning Objectives
modern courtship
7.7: Shifts in Modern Courtship
modern family
1.4: Different Types of Family Structures
modern marriage
8: Marriage
modern marriage patterns
8.5: Family Households and Modern Marriage Patterns
monogamy
2: Diversity in Family Life
2.1: Learning Objectives
2.2: Introduction
2.4: Polygamy and Consensual Non-Monogamy
motherhood
9.3: Childlessness and Childfree Lives
motherhood penalty
3.12: The Gendered Division of Household Labor
multigenerational families
10.8: The Challenges of Parenting in Contemporary Society
multigenerational family
1.4: Different Types of Family Structures
multiracial families
4.4: Race as a Social Construct

N

Native American
4.6: Indigenous and Native American Families
neglect
11: Family Violence and Abuse
11.11: Elder Abuse and Neglect
11.14: Conclusion
11.2: Introduction
11.3: Understanding Family Violence and Abuse
nonbinary
3.3: Defining Sex and Gender
3.4: The Gender Binary
3.6: Doing Gender
3.8: Gender Identity
6.5: Patterns of LGBTQ+ Identification
noncustodial parents
12.8: Child Custody, Parenting Plans, and Co-Parenting
norms
1.3: Definitions of Marriage and Family
nuclear family
1.1: Learning Objectives
1.4: Different Types of Family Structures
2.1: Learning Objectives

O

Obergefell
6.12: Marriage Equality
objectives
10.1: Learning Objectives
occupational
3.13: Gender and the Labor Market
older adults
11.11: Elder Abuse and Neglect
online safety
10.10: Parenting in the Age of Artificial Intelligence (AI)
10.9: Parenting in the Age of Social Media
open relationships
2.4: Polygamy and Consensual Non-Monogamy
oppression
6.7: The Lavender Scare, Stonewall, and the Policing of Sexuality

P

pandemic
6.9: The HIV/AIDS Pandemic
pansexual
6.4: Glossary of Sexual Orientation and Related Terms
parental conflict
12.9: The Impact of Divorce
parental education
10.7: Working Parents, Childcare, and Family Life
parental responsibilities
10.8: The Challenges of Parenting in Contemporary Society
parental rights
9.8: Adoption
parental roles
1.7: Contemporary Family Life
parenthood
1.1: Learning Objectives
9.11: Conclusion
9.2: Introduction
9.5: Pathways to Parenthood
parenting
1.11: Family-Focused Frameworks
10: Parenting in Contemporary Society
10.1: Learning Objectives
10.10: Parenting in the Age of Artificial Intelligence (AI)
10.11: Conclusion
10.2: Introduction
10.5: Parenting Practices, Styles, and Ideologies
10.6: Parenting in LGBTQ+ Families
10.8: The Challenges of Parenting in Contemporary Society
10.9: Parenting in the Age of Social Media
11.9: Child Abuse and Neglect
12.2: Introduction
2.11: Foster Families
2.6: Same-Sex Couples and LGBTQ+ Families
7.10: Conclusion
parenting paradigms
10.3: The Functions of Parenting
parenting plans
12: Divorce and Remarriage
12.8: Child Custody, Parenting Plans, and Co-Parenting
parenting practices
10: Parenting in Contemporary Society
11.12: Intergenerational Trauma and the Effects of Violence Across Generations
5.9: Social Class, Parenting, and the Reproduction of Inequality
parenting quality
12.9: The Impact of Divorce
parenting stress
12.7: Why Marriages End—Common Pathways to Divorce
parenting styles
10.1: Learning Objectives
10.11: Conclusion
2.10: Blended Families
parents
10.3: The Functions of Parenting
partner attraction
7.1: Learning Objectives
partner preferences
7.3: Explaining Attraction - Evolutionary and Sociocultural Perspectives
partner selection
7.10: Conclusion
8.1: Learning Objectives
8.2: Introduction
partnership forms
2.2: Introduction
passion
7.6: Theoretical Models of Love
pathways to divorce
12.1: Learning Objectives
pathways_to_parenthood
9: Childlessness, Childfree Lives, and Pathways to Parenthood
patriarchy
3: Sex and Gender
3.1: Learning Objectives
3.10: Gender Inequality and Patriarchy
patrilineal
4.6: Indigenous and Native American Families
Patterns of LGBTQ+ Identification
6: Sexuality and Sexual Orientation
permissive
10.5: Parenting Practices, Styles, and Ideologies
personal preferences
8.11: Conclusion
personal safety
3.10: Gender Inequality and Patriarchy
physical abuse
11.4: Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)
11.9: Child Abuse and Neglect
physical appearance
7.3: Explaining Attraction - Evolutionary and Sociocultural Perspectives
physical attractiveness
7: Attraction, Love, and Relationship Initiation
7.1: Learning Objectives
7.4: The Role of Physical Attractiveness
physical custody
12.8: Child Custody, Parenting Plans, and Co-Parenting
physical violence
11.3: Understanding Family Violence and Abuse
plural marriage
2.4: Polygamy and Consensual Non-Monogamy
police relations
6.7: The Lavender Scare, Stonewall, and the Policing of Sexuality
policing
6.7: The Lavender Scare, Stonewall, and the Policing of Sexuality
policing gender
3.1: Learning Objectives
politics
3.10: Gender Inequality and Patriarchy
polyamory
2.4: Polygamy and Consensual Non-Monogamy

polyandry
2.4: Polygamy and Consensual Non-Monogamy
polygamy
2: Diversity in Family Life
2.4: Polygamy and Consensual Non-Monogamy
polygyny
2.4: Polygamy and Consensual Non-Monogamy
population growth
1.9: The Study of Demography
4.10: Immigration and Family Life
postpartum care
9.10: Racial Disparities in Maternal Health Outcomes
poverty
2.9: Single-Parent Families
5: Social Class
5.10: Conclusion
5.4: Social Class and Family Inequality
5.6: Standard of Living, Poverty, and Basic Needs
poverty risk
8.8: Marriage and Well-Being
power
11.13: Theoretical Perspectives on Family Violence and Sexual Violence
3.2: Introduction
power dynamics
1.10: Theoretical Perspectives on the Family
5.8: Theoretical Perspectives on Social Stratification
power relations
11.10: Incest and Sibling Sexual Abuse
practices
10.5: Parenting Practices, Styles, and Ideologies
predictive divorce estimates
12.4: Measuring Divorce
pregnancy
9.6: In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)
pregnancy complications
9.10: Racial Disparities in Maternal Health Outcomes
pretty privilege
7.4: The Role of Physical Attractiveness
prevention education
11.7: Sexual Violence
pride
6: Sexuality and Sexual Orientation
6.7: The Lavender Scare, Stonewall, and the Policing of Sexuality
6.8: LGBTQ+ Activism, Pride, and Queer Joy
private adoption
9.8: Adoption
pronatalism
9.1: Learning Objectives
9.3: Childlessness and Childfree Lives
property division
12.3: Divorce and the Legal Process
Propinquity
7.5: Social Factors in Relationship Formation
psychological abuse
11.11: Elder Abuse and Neglect
11.3: Understanding Family Violence and Abuse
11.4: Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)
psychological consequences
12.9: The Impact of Divorce
psychological effects
11.10: Incest and Sibling Sexual Abuse
11.6: Effects of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) on Survivors, Children, and Families
psychological health
8.9: The Marriage Benefit Imbalance
public health
11.11: Elder Abuse and Neglect
11.4: Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)
public opinion
4.10: Immigration and Family Life
public policies
10.2: Introduction
public policy
10.1: Learning Objectives
2.3: Exploring Diversity in Family Life

Q

queer
6.4: Glossary of Sexual Orientation and Related Terms
6.8: LGBTQ+ Activism, Pride, and Queer Joy
queer community
6.7: The Lavender Scare, Stonewall, and the Policing of Sexuality

R

race
1.8: The Sociological Imagination and Family Life
12.6: Social Patterns in Divorce
4: Race and Ethnicity
4.11: Conclusion
4.2: Introduction
4.3: Questioning Biological Definitions of Race
4.4: Race as a Social Construct
4.5: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity
4.9: African American Families
race and ethnicity
9.9: Demographic Patterns of Fertility and Family Formation
race and poverty
5.6: Standard of Living, Poverty, and Basic Needs
race ethnicity distinction
4.1: Learning Objectives
race social construct
4.1: Learning Objectives
racial categories
4.4: Race as a Social Construct
racial disparities
9.10: Racial Disparities in Maternal Health Outcomes
racial inequality
4.8: Asian American Families
8.7: The Regulation of Marriage - Interracial and Same-Sex Marriage
racial justice
3.11: Feminism
racial marriage rates
8.5: Family Households and Modern Marriage Patterns
racial_disparities
9: Childlessness, Childfree Lives, and Pathways to Parenthood
racism
5.3: Social Stratification and Family Life
refined divorce rate
12.4: Measuring Divorce
regional differences
12.6: Social Patterns in Divorce
relationship dynamics
8.6: Global Variations in Marriage
relationship formation
7: Attraction, Love, and Relationship Initiation
7.5: Social Factors in Relationship Formation
relationship initiation
7.9: AI Companions and the Changing Meaning of Intimacy
relationship patterns
8.5: Family Households and Modern Marriage Patterns
relationship quality
2.7: Living Apart Together (LAT)
relationship strain
12.7: Why Marriages End—Common Pathways to Divorce
relationships
1.11: Family-Focused Frameworks
1.3: Definitions of Marriage and Family
11.13: Theoretical Perspectives on Family Violence and Sexual Violence
12.2: Introduction
2.2: Introduction
2.5: Cohabitation
2.7: Living Apart Together (LAT)
2.8: Singlehood
3.14: Conclusion
3.2: Introduction
7.2: Introduction
7.7: Shifts in Modern Courtship
7.8: Dating Apps and Digital Courtship
remarriage
12: Divorce and Remarriage
12.1: Learning Objectives
12.10: Remarriage, Repartnering, and Blended Families
12.11: Conclusion
12.2: Introduction
12.6: Social Patterns in Divorce
repartnering
12: Divorce and Remarriage
representation
6.5: Patterns of LGBTQ+ Identification
reproductive autonomy
9.4: Reproductive Choice
reproductive choice
9.3: Childlessness and Childfree Lives
9.4: Reproductive Choice
reproductive control
4.9: African American Families
reproductive health
9.10: Racial Disparities in Maternal Health Outcomes
reproductive inequality
9.4: Reproductive Choice
reproductive rights
3.11: Feminism
9.1: Learning Objectives
9.11: Conclusion
9.2: Introduction
reproductive_choice
9: Childlessness, Childfree Lives, and Pathways to Parenthood
research findings
10.1: Learning Objectives

resilience
2.9: Single-Parent Families
6.10: LGBTQ+ Families, Family Acceptance, and Family Rejection
rights
6.12: Marriage Equality
6.6: Heteronormativity and Cisnormativity
risk factors
11.11: Elder Abuse and Neglect
Roe v. Wade
9.4: Reproductive Choice
role conflict
1.5: Statuses, Roles, and Family Groups
role strain
1.5: Statuses, Roles, and Family Groups
roles
1: Introduction to Marriage and Family
1.3: Definitions of Marriage and Family
1.5: Statuses, Roles, and Family Groups
romance
7.8: Dating Apps and Digital Courtship
romantic attraction
6.3: Sexual Orientation as a Spectrum
7.3: Explaining Attraction - Evolutionary and Sociocultural Perspectives
romantic love
8.3: Marriage as a Social Construction
romantic relationships
2.7: Living Apart Together (LAT)
7.10: Conclusion
7.6: Theoretical Models of Love

S

safe
6.11: LGBTQ+ Youth, Families, and Inclusion in Schools
safety
11.11: Elder Abuse and Neglect
school climate
6.1: Learning Objectives
segregation
3.13: Gender and the Labor Market
4.11: Conclusion
separation
12.7: Why Marriages End—Common Pathways to Divorce
sex
3.3: Defining Sex and Gender
sex assignment
3.7: Sex Assignment and Intersex Variations
sexual abuse
11.4: Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)
11.9: Child Abuse and Neglect
sexual assault
11.7: Sexual Violence
sexual attraction
6.3: Sexual Orientation as a Spectrum
sexual harassment
11.7: Sexual Violence
sexual hierarchy
6.6: Heteronormativity and Cisnormativity
Sexual Identities
6.2: Introduction
sexual misconduct
11.7: Sexual Violence
sexual orientation
3.3: Defining Sex and Gender
6: Sexuality and Sexual Orientation
6.1: Learning Objectives
6.13: Conclusion
6.2: Introduction
6.3: Sexual Orientation as a Spectrum
6.4: Glossary of Sexual Orientation and Related Terms
7.3: Explaining Attraction - Evolutionary and Sociocultural Perspectives
sexual violence
11: Family Violence and Abuse
11.1: Learning Objectives
11.13: Theoretical Perspectives on Family Violence and Sexual Violence
11.14: Conclusion
11.2: Introduction
11.7: Sexual Violence
11.8: Anti-Violence Activism, #MeToo, and Social Change
sexuality
11.10: Incest and Sibling Sexual Abuse
3.9: The Policing of Gender and Sexuality
6.4: Glossary of Sexual Orientation and Related Terms
6.7: The Lavender Scare, Stonewall, and the Policing of Sexuality
sexuality spectrum
6.3: Sexual Orientation as a Spectrum
sibling sexual abuse
11: Family Violence and Abuse
11.10: Incest and Sibling Sexual Abuse
single fathers
2.9: Single-Parent Families
single mothers
2.9: Single-Parent Families
single parents
9.6: In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)
singlehood
2.12: Conclusion
2.8: Singlehood
slavery
4.11: Conclusion
slavery legacy
4.9: African American Families
smartphones
10.9: Parenting in the Age of Social Media
social acceptance
2.6: Same-Sex Couples and LGBTQ+ Families
social advantages
7.4: The Role of Physical Attractiveness
social capital
5.9: Social Class, Parenting, and the Reproduction of Inequality
social change
1.2: Introduction
11.8: Anti-Violence Activism, #MeToo, and Social Change
4.11: Conclusion
social class
1.8: The Sociological Imagination and Family Life
5: Social Class
5.1: Learning Objectives
5.10: Conclusion
5.2: Introduction
5.3: Social Stratification and Family Life
5.4: Social Class and Family Inequality
5.7: Social Class and Family Formation
5.8: Theoretical Perspectives on Social Stratification
5.9: Social Class, Parenting, and the Reproduction of Inequality
8.10: The Sociology of Weddings
9.9: Demographic Patterns of Fertility and Family Formation
social connections
7.9: AI Companions and the Changing Meaning of Intimacy
social construct
2.3: Exploring Diversity in Family Life
4: Race and Ethnicity
4.4: Race as a Social Construct
social construction
3.5: The Social Construction of Gender
8: Marriage
8.1: Learning Objectives
social construction of gender
3: Sex and Gender
3.1: Learning Objectives
social constructs
4.11: Conclusion
4.9: African American Families
social context
1.2: Introduction
social contexts
10.11: Conclusion
social development
10.6: Parenting in LGBTQ+ Families
social dynamics
7.7: Shifts in Modern Courtship
social factors
2.1: Learning Objectives
7: Attraction, Love, and Relationship Initiation
7.1: Learning Objectives
social forces
1.1: Learning Objectives
1.12: Conclusion
1.2: Introduction
8.11: Conclusion
social inequality
10.4: Sociological Perspectives on Parenting
4.3: Questioning Biological Definitions of Race
5.1: Learning Objectives
social institution
1.7: Contemporary Family Life
10.2: Introduction
8: Marriage
8.11: Conclusion
8.2: Introduction
8.4: Marriage as a Social Institution
social institutions
1.3: Definitions of Marriage and Family
3.2: Introduction
3.4: The Gender Binary
5.3: Social Stratification and Family Life
social interaction
3.6: Doing Gender
social interactions
1.5: Statuses, Roles, and Family Groups

social issue
11.4: Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

social issues
1.8: The Sociological Imagination and Family Life

social justice
5.4: Social Class and Family Inequality

social media
10.1: Learning Objectives
10.10: Parenting in the Age of Artificial Intelligence (AI)
10.9: Parenting in the Age of Social Media

social mobility
5: Social Class
5.1: Learning Objectives
5.2: Introduction
5.4: Social Class and Family Inequality
5.5: Social Mobility

social movements
6.12: Marriage Equality

social networks
8.6: Global Variations in Marriage

social norms
7.2: Introduction
9.3: Childlessness and Childfree Lives

social organization
1.3: Definitions of Marriage and Family

social patterns
12.6: Social Patterns in Divorce

social power
11.5: Patterns of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Across Gender and Sexuality
4.4: Race as a Social Construct

social problem
11.11: Elder Abuse and Neglect

social problems
11.13: Theoretical Perspectives on Family Violence and Sexual Violence
11.14: Conclusion

social rituals
8.10: The Sociology of Weddings

social science
12.10: Remarriage, Repartnering, and Blended Families

social stigma
2.5: Cohabitation

social stratification
5: Social Class
5.1: Learning Objectives
5.2: Introduction
5.3: Social Stratification and Family Life
5.4: Social Class and Family Inequality
5.5: Social Mobility
5.8: Theoretical Perspectives on Social Stratification

social structures
1.8: The Sociological Imagination and Family Life

social systems
3.10: Gender Inequality and Patriarchy

social transition
3.8: Gender Identity

social understandings
6.13: Conclusion

socialization
1.10: Theoretical Perspectives on the Family
10.3: The Functions of Parenting
10.4: Sociological Perspectives on Parenting
3.9: The Policing of Gender and Sexuality

societal expectations
3.5: The Social Construction of Gender

societal trends
1.9: The Study of Demography

sociocultural explanations
7.1: Learning Objectives

sociocultural perspective
7: Attraction, Love, and Relationship Initiation
7.3: Explaining Attraction - Evolutionary and Sociocultural Perspectives

socioeconomic challenges
5.6: Standard of Living, Poverty, and Basic Needs

socioeconomic status
5.3: Social Stratification and Family Life
5.4: Social Class and Family Inequality
5.7: Social Class and Family Formation

socioeconomic success
4.8: Asian American Families

socioeconomics
9.5: Pathways to Parenthood

sociological imagination
1.2: Introduction
1.8: The Sociological Imagination and Family Life

sociological perspectives
10: Parenting in Contemporary Society
10.1: Learning Objectives
10.4: Sociological Perspectives on Parenting

sociological statistics
12.4: Measuring Divorce

sociological studies
1.9: The Study of Demography

sociologist
2.3: Exploring Diversity in Family Life

sociologists
1.3: Definitions of Marriage and Family

Sociology
1.10: Theoretical Perspectives on the Family
1.11: Family-Focused Frameworks
1.12: Conclusion
1.2: Introduction
1.5: Statuses, Roles, and Family Groups
11.10: Incest and Sibling Sexual Abuse
11.13: Theoretical Perspectives on Family Violence and Sexual Violence
12.10: Remarriage, Repartnering, and Blended Families
12.11: Conclusion
2.10: Blended Families
4.3: Questioning Biological Definitions of Race
4.4: Race as a Social Construct
4.6: Indigenous and Native American Families
8: Marriage
8.10: The Sociology of Weddings
8.2: Introduction

sociology of gender
3.3: Defining Sex and Gender

sociology of the family
7.10: Conclusion

sperm
9.6: In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)

spousal support
12.3: Divorce and the Legal Process

stability
2.10: Blended Families

standard of living
5: Social Class
5.1: Learning Objectives
5.2: Introduction

statuses
1: Introduction to Marriage and Family
1.5: Statuses, Roles, and Family Groups

stepparent adoption
9.8: Adoption

Sternberg's model
7.1: Learning Objectives

Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love
7.6: Theoretical Models of Love

stigma
6.9: The HIV/AIDS Pandemic

Stonewall riots
6.1: Learning Objectives

structural functionalism
1.10: Theoretical Perspectives on the Family
10.4: Sociological Perspectives on Parenting
5.1: Learning Objectives
5.8: Theoretical Perspectives on Social Stratification

structural inequalities
4.2: Introduction

structural mobility
5.5: Social Mobility

structural racism
4.9: African American Families
9.10: Racial Disparities in Maternal Health Outcomes

styles
10.5: Parenting Practices, Styles, and Ideologies

support networks
10.8: The Challenges of Parenting in Contemporary Society
2.9: Single-Parent Families

supportive
6.11: LGBTQ+ Youth, Families, and Inclusion in Schools

Supreme Court
6.12: Marriage Equality

Supreme Court decisions
8.7: The Regulation of Marriage - Interracial and Same-Sex Marriage

surgical procedures
3.7: Sex Assignment and Intersex Variations

surrogacy
9: Childlessness, Childfree Lives, and Pathways to Parenthood
9.1: Learning Objectives
9.11: Conclusion
9.2: Introduction
9.5: Pathways to Parenthood
9.7: Surrogacy

survivors
11.6: Effects of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) on Survivors, Children, and Families
11.7: Sexual Violence

swinging
2.4: Polygamy and Consensual Non-Monogamy

symbolic interactionism
1.10: Theoretical Perspectives on the Family
10.4: Sociological Perspectives on Parenting
5.1: Learning Objectives
5.8: Theoretical Perspectives on Social Stratification

systemic oppression
4.4: Race as a Social Construct

T

technological companionship
7.9: AI Companions and the Changing Meaning of Intimacy
technology
10.9: Parenting in the Age of Social Media
7.8: Dating Apps and Digital Courtship
theoretical models
7: Attraction, Love, and Relationship Initiation
theoretical perspectives
1: Introduction to Marriage and Family
1.12: Conclusion
11: Family Violence and Abuse
5.8: Theoretical Perspectives on Social Stratification
traditional family
1.4: Different Types of Family Structures
traditions
4.5: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity
transgender
3.3: Defining Sex and Gender
3.4: The Gender Binary
3.6: Doing Gender
3.8: Gender Identity
6.5: Patterns of LGBTQ+ Identification
6.7: The Lavender Scare, Stonewall, and the Policing of Sexuality
trauma
11.13: Theoretical Perspectives on Family Violence and Sexual Violence
11.2: Introduction
11.6: Effects of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) on Survivors, Children, and Families
11.9: Child Abuse and Neglect
treatment
6.9: The HIV/AIDS Pandemic
trends
12.5: A Brief History of U.S. Divorce Trends
6.5: Patterns of LGBTQ+ Identification
8.2: Introduction
trial run
2.5: Cohabitation
types of marriage
8.1: Learning Objectives

U

U.S. divorce trends
12.1: Learning Objectives
U.S. history
4.10: Immigration and Family Life
United States
12.5: A Brief History of U.S. Divorce Trends
12.6: Social Patterns in Divorce
4.2: Introduction
5.10: Conclusion
5.2: Introduction
unmarried partners
8.5: Family Households and Modern Marriage Patterns
unpaid labor
3.12: The Gendered Division of Household Labor
upward mobility
5.5: Social Mobility
US divorce trends
12: Divorce and Remarriage

V

verbal abuse
11.4: Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)
victimization
11.5: Patterns of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Across Gender and Sexuality
victims and survivors
11.3: Understanding Family Violence and Abuse
violence
6.6: Heteronormativity and Cisnormativity
visibility
6.8: LGBTQ+ Activism, Pride, and Queer Joy
voluntary childlessness
9.3: Childlessness and Childfree Lives

W

waves of feminism
3.1: Learning Objectives
wealth inequality
5.10: Conclusion
wedding traditions
8.10: The Sociology of Weddings
8.3: Marriage as a Social Construction
weddings
8: Marriage
8.10: The Sociology of Weddings
women's rights
3.11: Feminism
9.1: Learning Objectives
9.4: Reproductive Choice
working mothers
1.6: A Historical Context for Today's Families
working parents
10: Parenting in Contemporary Society
10.7: Working Parents, Childcare, and Family Life
workplace inequality
3.13: Gender and the Labor Market

Y

young adults
2.5: Cohabitation
7.7: Shifts in Modern Courtship
youth
10.9: Parenting in the Age of Social Media
6.11: LGBTQ+ Youth, Families, and Inclusion in Schools
youthfulness
7.4: The Role of Physical Attractiveness

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S

Sample Word 1 | Sample Definition 1

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  - 1: Introduction to Marriage and Family - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 1.1: Learning Objectives - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 1.2: Introduction - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 1.3: Definitions of Marriage and Family - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 1.4: Different Types of Family Structures - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 1.5: Statuses, Roles, and Family Groups - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 1.6: A Historical Context for Today's Families - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 1.7: Contemporary Family Life - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 1.8: The Sociological Imagination and Family Life - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 1.9: The Study of Demography - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 1.10: Theoretical Perspectives on the Family - *CC BY-SA 3.0*
    - 1.11: Family-Focused Frameworks - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 1.12: Conclusion - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
  - 2: Diversity in Family Life - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 2.1: Learning Objectives - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 2.2: Introduction - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 2.3: Exploring Diversity in Family Life - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 2.4: Polygamy and Consensual Non-Monogamy - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 2.5: Cohabitation - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 2.6: Same-Sex Couples and LGBTQ+ Families - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 2.7: Living Apart Together (LAT) - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 2.8: Singlehood - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 2.9: Single-Parent Families - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 2.10: Blended Families - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 2.11: Foster Families - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 2.12: Conclusion - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
  - 3: Sex and Gender - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.1: Learning Objectives - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.2: Introduction - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.3: Defining Sex and Gender - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.4: The Gender Binary - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.5: The Social Construction of Gender - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.6: Doing Gender - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.7: Sex Assignment and Intersex Variations - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.8: Gender Identity - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.9: The Policing of Gender and Sexuality - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.10: Gender Inequality and Patriarchy - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.11: Feminism - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.12: The Gendered Division of Household Labor - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.13: Gender and the Labor Market - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.14: Conclusion - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
  - 4: Race and Ethnicity - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 4.1: Learning Objectives - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 4.2: Introduction - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 4.3: Questioning Biological Definitions of Race - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 4.4: Race as a Social Construct - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 4.5: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity - *CC BY-SA*

4.0
- 4.6: Indigenous and Native American Families - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 4.7: Hispanic and Latino Families - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 4.8: Asian American Families - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 4.9: African American Families - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 4.10: Immigration and Family Life - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 4.11: Conclusion - *CC BY-SA 4.0*

◦ 5: Social Class - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 5.1: Learning Objectives - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 5.2: Introduction - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 5.3: Social Stratification and Family Life - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 5.4: Social Class and Family Inequality - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 5.5: Social Mobility - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 5.6: Standard of Living, Poverty, and Basic Needs - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 5.7: Social Class and Family Formation - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 5.8: Theoretical Perspectives on Social Stratification - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 5.9: Social Class, Parenting, and the Reproduction of Inequality - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 5.10: Conclusion - *CC BY-SA 4.0*

◦ 6: Sexuality and Sexual Orientation - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.1: Learning Objectives - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.2: Introduction - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.3: Sexual Orientation as a Spectrum - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.4: Glossary of Sexual Orientation and Related Terms - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.5: Patterns of LGBTQ+ Identification - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.6: Heteronormativity and Cisnormativity - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.7: The Lavender Scare, Stonewall, and the Policing of Sexuality - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.8: LGBTQ+ Activism, Pride, and Queer Joy - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.9: The HIV/AIDS Pandemic - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.10: LGBTQ+ Families, Family Acceptance, and Family Rejection - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.11: LGBTQ+ Youth, Families, and Inclusion in Schools - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.12: Marriage Equality - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.13: Conclusion - *CC BY-SA 4.0*

◦ 7: Attraction, Love, and Relationship Initiation - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.1: Learning Objectives - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.2: Introduction - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.3: Explaining Attraction - Evolutionary and Sociocultural Perspectives - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.4: The Role of Physical Attractiveness - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.5: Social Factors in Relationship Formation - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.6: Theoretical Models of Love - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.7: Shifts in Modern Courtship - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.8: Dating Apps and Digital Courtship - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.9: AI Companions and the Changing Meaning of Intimacy - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.10: Conclusion - *CC BY-SA 4.0*

◦ 8: Marriage - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.1: Learning Objectives - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.2: Introduction - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.3: Marriage as a Social Construction - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.4: Marriage as a Social Institution - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.5: Family Households and Modern Marriage Patterns - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.6: Global Variations in Marriage - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.7: The Regulation of Marriage - Interracial and Same-Sex Marriage - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.8: Marriage and Well-Being - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.9: The Marriage Benefit Imbalance - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.10: The Sociology of Weddings - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.11: Conclusion - *CC BY-SA 4.0*

◦ 9: Childlessness, Childfree Lives, and Pathways to Parenthood - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.1: Learning Objectives - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.2: Introduction - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.3: Childlessness and Childfree Lives - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.4: Reproductive Choice - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.5: Pathways to Parenthood - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.6: In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.7: Surrogacy - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.8: Adoption - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.9: Demographic Patterns of Fertility and Family Formation - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.10: Racial Disparities in Maternal Health Outcomes - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.11: Conclusion - *CC BY-SA 4.0*

◦ 10: Parenting in Contemporary Society - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.1: Learning Objectives - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.2: Introduction - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.3: The Functions of Parenting - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.4: Sociological Perspectives on Parenting - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.5: Parenting Practices, Styles, and Ideologies - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.6: Parenting in LGBTQ+ Families - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.7: Working Parents, Childcare, and Family Life - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.8: The Challenges of Parenting in Contemporary Society - *CC BY-SA 4.0*

- 10.9: Parenting in the Age of Social Media - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.10: Parenting in the Age of Artificial Intelligence (AI) - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.11: Conclusion - *CC BY-SA 4.0*

◦ 11: Family Violence and Abuse - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 11.1: Learning Objectives - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 11.2: Introduction - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 11.3: Understanding Family Violence and Abuse - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 11.4: Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 11.5: Patterns of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Across Gender and Sexuality - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 11.6: Effects of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) on Survivors, Children, and Families - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 11.7: Sexual Violence - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 11.8: Anti-Violence Activism, #MeToo, and Social Change - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 11.9: Child Abuse and Neglect - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 11.10: Incest and Sibling Sexual Abuse - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 11.11: Elder Abuse and Neglect - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 11.12: Intergenerational Trauma and the Effects of Violence Across Generations - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 11.13: Theoretical Perspectives on Family Violence and Sexual Violence - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 11.14: Conclusion - *CC BY-SA 4.0*

◦ 12: Divorce and Remarriage - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 12.1: Learning Objectives - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 12.2: Introduction - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 12.3: Divorce and the Legal Process - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 12.4: Measuring Divorce - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 12.5: A Brief History of U.S. Divorce Trends - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 12.6: Social Patterns in Divorce - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 12.7: Why Marriages End—Common Pathways to Divorce - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 12.8: Child Custody, Parenting Plans, and Co-Parenting - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 12.9: The Impact of Divorce - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 12.10: Remarriage, Repartnering, and Blended Families - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 12.11: Conclusion - *CC BY-SA 4.0*

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