

## 2.4 Theoretical Perspectives on the Family

**MAJOR QUESTION** What are eight perspectives for looking at the family and relationships?



**PREVIEW** Theories offer perspectives explaining why processes and events occur. Eight perspectives for viewing marriage and family are structural-functional, conflict, symbolic interaction, family systems, social exchange, feminist/male studies, ecological, and family development.

Surveys can provide understanding, but to better understand marriage and family phenomena, we need a *theory*—a **perspective or a set of statements that explains why processes and events occur**. Theories can help analyze research findings and perhaps suggest solutions that can be made into policies and laws.

Although textbooks discussing family theory may cover as many as 16 perspectives, we will describe just the following eight: (1) structural-functional, (2) conflict, (3) symbolic interaction—which we will treat as the most important perspectives—followed by (4) family systems, (5) social exchange, (6) feminist, (7) ecological, and (8) family development. These are summarized in the following chart. (See ■ Panel 2.5, next page.) Note: *The first three theoretical perspectives are the most important.* From time to time we will show how these three could be applied to particular subjects (such as gender and sexuality) discussed in the book.

### Two Types of Theories: Macro-Level versus Micro-Level Orientations

Sociologists divide the theoretical perspectives into two types—those with *macro-level orientation* and those with *micro-level orientation*.

#### Macro-Level Orientation: The Top-Down View

A theory representing a *macro-level orientation* focuses on large-scale patterns of society. The structural-functional perspective and the conflict per-



**PANEL 2.5** The Eight Theoretical Perspectives Compared

|                        | 1.                                                                                          | 2.                                                                                | 3.                                                                                                      | 4.                                                                                                                                       | 5.                                                                                                                  | 6.                                                                                                                 | 7.                                                                    | 8.                                                                                              |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                        | STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONAL                                                                       | CONFLICT                                                                          | SYMBOLIC INTERACTION                                                                                    | FAMILY SYSTEMS                                                                                                                           | SOCIAL EXCHANGE                                                                                                     | FEMINIST                                                                                                           | ECOLOGICAL                                                            | FAMILY DEVELOPMENT                                                                              |
| Type of orientation    | Macro                                                                                       | Macro                                                                             | Micro                                                                                                   | Micro                                                                                                                                    | Micro                                                                                                               | Macro and micro                                                                                                    | Macro and micro                                                       | Macro and micro                                                                                 |
| Principal features     | Stability, consensus, instrumental, and expressive roles; manifest and latent functions     | Conflict, competition over scarce resources, lack of consensus, social inequality | Ongoing internal family interaction; actions and reactions of family members to each other              | Family members act as interconnected parts in which changes in one part create changes in other parts; all parts work toward equilibrium | People's interactions in relationships represent the efforts of each person to maximize benefits and minimize costs | Inequality in women's roles is the result of male dominance in the family and society                              | Family is influenced by its immediate and distant environments        | Family members accomplish tasks as they move through age-related stages                         |
| Illustrative questions | What functions does the family serve? How does the family contribute to societal stability? | Who benefits from the existing social arrangement?                                | How do family interactions create reality for the family? How is the family experienced by its members? | How do family members experience crises in the family (illness, economic changes, substance abuse)?                                      | How does one partner react to a lack of affection from another?                                                     | How do men benefit from traditional gender roles? How are women oppressed by the traditional definition of family? | How do individuals adapt through interactions with their environment? | How do family roles change based on absence or presence of children or father or mother figure? |



spective are two examples. They take a top-down view, looking at such sweeping influences on marriage and family as economic forces, social movements, technological innovations, and popular culture.

### Micro-Level Orientation: The Bottom-Up View

A theory representing a *micro-level orientation* focuses on small-scale patterns of society, concentrating on individual interactions in specific settings. The symbolic-interaction perspective is an example of a micro-level orientation. It takes a bottom-up view, assuming that society is the product of countless everyday interactions of individuals, whose perceptions of reality are variable and changing.

Now let us consider the theories themselves.

## 1. The Structural-Functional Perspective: The Family Is a Social Institution Performing Essential Functions

Representing a macro-level orientation, the *structural-functional perspective* views the family as a social institution that performs essential functions for society to ensure its stability. Just as your body is made up of parts that work together to enable you to function as a human being, society is viewed as being made up of institutions—family, school, workplace, and so on—that enable the larger society to function and have stability. Structural functionalists look not only at the functions that the family provides for society but also at the functions the family provides for its members and that its members provide for it.

The leading proponent of the structural-functional perspective was sociologist **Talcott Parsons** in the 1950s and 1960s, who held that families functioned best when husbands and fathers carried out instrumental roles and wives and mothers carried out expressive roles. **In his instrumental role, the male was the breadwinner and was hard-working, self-confident, and competitive. In her expressive role, the female was the homemaker and was nurturing and supportive** (Parsons and Bales 1955).

Structural-functionalists say there are two kinds of functions: manifest (intended) and latent (unintended).

■ **Manifest Functions—Intended:** *Manifest functions* are open, stated, and conscious functions. Manifest functions are intended. For example, the manifest functions of industrialization were to build things faster and better. The manifest function of an automobile is to provide transportation from one place to another.

■ **Latent Functions—Unintended:** *Latent functions* are unconscious or unintended functions; they have hidden purposes. Latent functions are unintended, accidental, or even covert. For example, some latent functions of industrialization were to loosen family control over children because they no longer worked within the home. A latent function of a car was to change the nature of dating (and some people were unintentionally conceived in cars).



## Applying the Perspective

In the structural-functional view, today's families have three primary functions, all designed to lend stability to the larger society:

**To Ensure That Society Has an Ongoing Supply of New Members and to Be a Source of Socialization:** By bearing and raising children, families continue to supply the larger society with new members to help promote its stability. The members can't just be new warm bodies, however. They must be raised to speak the language of the society and understand its norms and roles. That is, the family is a source of **socialization**—the process by which offspring learn attitudes, beliefs, and values appropriate to their society and culture so they can function effectively in society. Many countries have different cultures within them (as Turkey, for instance, has Kurds) whose language and norms are sufficiently different that they represent a threat to the stability of the larger society.

**To Provide Economic Support for Family Members:** Until recent times, families mainly served an economic rather than emotional purpose. Even in early 20th century America, the family was largely an economic unit intended to provide food, shelter, and the like for its members. The importance of this function is still seen among poor families in countries without strong social safety nets. It is also apparent in the ways husbands and wives in the United States help each other during times of economic distress, as when a husband loses his job and the wife becomes the important source of support.

**To Provide Emotional Support for Family Members:** Recall poet Robert Frost's line from Chapter 1 that home is the place in which "when you have to go there, they have to take you in." This implies that a family gives not only economic but also emotional support to its members. Of course, not all families are so supportive. Indeed, some can cause considerable stress, as we discuss elsewhere in this book. Even so, a family considered in its broadest sense—not only immediate family members but also grandparents, aunts, and uncles—can be a source of emotional support that one cannot always find with friends or counselors.

**NEW MEMBERS.** One function of the family, according to the structural-functional theoretical perspective, is to ensure an ongoing supply of new members and to socialize them to the appropriate values of the society. Do you think the socialization process starts here, with different-colored identification cards or blankets—blue for boys, pink for girls? ►





## 2. The Conflict Perspective: Conflict & Change, Not Harmony, Is the Normal State of the Family

Also representing a macro-level orientation, the *conflict perspective* views **individuals and groups as being basically in conflict with each other for power and scarce resources**. Indeed, unlike structural functionalists, adherents of the conflict perspective consider competition and struggle within the family and among groups in society at large to be natural and often desirable. We see this embodied in the views of different groups on such subjects as sex education, stem cell research, abortion, and right-to-die issues. Not everything that a family does is harmonious, and not everything that its members do is good for one another. Spouses conflict with each other about division of labor, with their children about homework and dating practices, and with relatives about holiday rituals. Although family differences can lead to positive changes and patterns of resolution, they can also lead to escalations in conflict, such as domestic violence.

### Applying the Perspective

Family difficulties, according to conflict adherents, may result from societal problems, such as downturns in the economy. For example, although national statistics may lag by several years, localized surveys and court records showed that divorce filings were up in many parts of the United States during the poor economy and tense times following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (Zaslow 2003).

Conflict perspective proponents believe that differences appear for two reasons:

▪ **Conflict over Power:** All of us wish for autonomy and free choice. Living in a relationship or family, however, means that we must deal with the desires of others. Many relationships, therefore, consist of power struggles—over chores, over child care, over how to spend vacation time.

▪ **Conflict over Resources:** Parents and children struggle over who gets to use the family computer, who gets to watch which TV programs, who can use the car, and so on. Most households never have quite enough time, money, or possessions to go around, and conflict ensues.

## 3. The Symbolic Interaction Perspective: People's Interactions Ultimately Determine Their Behavior

**Herbert Blumer** (1969) adopted the term *symbolic interaction* to refer to the process of interpersonal interaction. His work is based on that of **Charles Horton Cooley** (1909) and **George Herbert Mead** (1934), influential sociologists during the 1920s and 1930s.

Representing the micro-level (not macro-level) orientation, the *symbolic interaction perspective* focuses on internal family interactions, the ongoing



**ing action and the response of family members to one another.** In this perspective, a family is not considered to be a standard structure (as the structural functionalists thought) but rather the creation of its members as they spontaneously interact with one another. That is, a family takes on a reality of its own based on the interchanges of its members. As sociologist **William I. Thomas** said, in what became known as the *Thomas theorem*, “**If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences**” (Thomas and Thomas 1928: 572).

For an *interaction*, or reciprocal act, to occur, there must be two people who are acting and responding to each other. The interactions are conducted by means of *symbols*—gestures or words that we interpret or define as we observe them in other people.

### Applying the Perspective

The symbolic interaction perspective rests on three mechanisms, as follows:

■ **Definition of the Situation:** *Definition of the situation* means that when people define a situation as real, it has real consequences. For instance, how you interpret the glances and words your date is exchanging with others at a party (politeness? flirting?) determines the reality that follows (which could be simply innocuous or could be harmful if it makes you jealous).

■ **Self-Image Based on Others' Interactions:** Your self-image is a response to how others interact with you. For instance, you might interpret your date's animated conversation with others at the party as meaning that he or she does not consider you very important. If this were to happen frequently, it could contribute to your having a negative self-image.

■ **Predictability of Behavior:** Once you have defined the situation and determined how you think you ought to behave, you and the other person can act in predictable ways, both in the present and in the future. For instance, if you decide that your date is flirting, you might be jealous not only throughout the party, but also about that same person at future parties.

## 4. The Family Systems Perspective: Family Members Are Interconnected, & Changes in One Affect Others

Representing a micro-level orientation, the *family systems perspective* suggests that **family members make up a system of interconnected parts of a whole and that changes in one part change the other parts**. What interests proponents of this perspective, which represents a somewhat Traditional model, is not the individual family members as much as how members interact with each other to make decisions and solve problems so as to achieve the system's collective goals (Day 1995).

### Applying the Perspective

A key concept in the family systems perspective is the notion of *equilibrium*. That is, a change in one part makes the family try to make adjustments that will help it go back to the way it was before—to attain equilibrium. An obvi-



ous example: When the major income earner becomes unemployed, everyone else in the household makes adjustments so that the family can keep going. That is, the other spouse might look for a job, the children's allowances are cut, and so on.

More interestingly, families have emotional equilibriums—ways of expression and behavior—that can be threatened by a change in any one part of the family. A common example is when the first child comes into a formerly childless relationship, altering the dynamics of interaction between husband and wife. "I'm convinced that this is one of the major reasons why so many divorces happen when the kids are young," says Armin Brott (quoted in Curiel 2001: C7), author of books about fatherhood. "You're focusing on the kids. You're tired as hell. You don't go out on dates anymore. You don't spend time nurturing your relationship. You don't spend time nurturing each other very much."

To keep the original equilibrium, new parents might try not allowing the relationship with their partner to focus solely on the child, to share responsibilities such as shopping and cooking, to eat dinner together (without the distraction of television), and to go to bed together at the same time (Curiel 2001).

## 5. The Social Exchange Perspective: Individuals Seek the Most Benefits & the Least Costs in a Relationship

An offshoot of the symbolic interaction perspective (and therefore representing a micro-level orientation), the *social exchange perspective* proposes that people's interactions represent the efforts of each person to maximize his or her benefits and minimize costs (Homans 1958; Blau 1964). The

### CHANGING CLOTHES—OR EQUILIBRIUM?

According to the family systems perspective, when changes occur in a family—as when a new child comes along—the family members make adjustments to achieve equilibrium—that is, to keep the family functioning as it had before. Can you think of emergencies or drastic changes that forced your family to make radical adjustments? How did family members behave? ▲





*benefits* (or rewards) you might seek from a relationship could include any or all of the following: wealth, security, affection, attractiveness, status, youth, power, fame, or intellectual gratification. The *costs* could be the loss of such things. If a relationship costs you more than it rewards you, you are apt to not continue it.

### Applying the Perspective

The social exchange perspective follows an economicslike model of rationality, in which couples in a relationship trade off obvious costs for obvious benefits (for example, she gets security and he gets fertility). But there are many relationships in which, when observed from the outside, it's not obvious what benefits the couple gets ("What does she see in *him*?").

Indeed, it might not even be obvious to one partner that the other partner is not getting benefits. Michele Weiner-Davis (1993), author of *Divorce Busting*, coined the term "walkaway wives" to describe the phenomenon of women who start out being the caretakers of marriage but end up withdrawing from their husbands who don't pay attention to them and don't respond to their nagging. The wives then shut down emotionally (because the benefits don't exceed the costs) and start quietly preparing to leave—to walk away. The husbands, who were relieved at the lack of nagging (more benefits, fewer costs), are then stunned when told that their marriage is over. Weiner-Davis's advice to husbands: "Spending time talking and doing enjoyable things together for women is not the icing on the cake. It is the cake" (quoted in Peterson 2000: 6D).

## 6. The Feminist Perspective: Inequality between Men & Women Results from Male Dominance

There are several feminist perspectives; indeed, one scholar (Lorber 1998) identified eleven variations. Nevertheless, we may summarize the *feminist perspective* (a subset of the conflict perspective, which embodies a macro-level orientation) as **being the view that inequality in women's roles is the result of male dominance in the family and in society**. That is, what the various views have in common are the twin ideas of inequality and oppression.

### Applying the Perspective

A long-standing feminist belief is that marriage makes men much happier but makes women more miserable. This was a view postulated by feminist scholar **Jessie Bernard** (1972), which fueled the feminist belief that the institution of marriage oppressed women.

Subsequent investigation, however, has found that Bernard's studies were flawed, and recent research of 10,641 Australian adults (De Vaus 2002) has contradicted her conclusions altogether. Whereas Bernard found that married women were more depressed than married men or single women and married men were less depressed than bachelors, the Australian study found that mental illness was equal—16% for men and 16% for women—but that the disorders were different. (Depression and anxiety were more common among women, whereas drug and alcohol abuse tended to affect men.)





**WALKAWAY WIFE.** In the social exchange perspective, partners in a marriage trade off costs for benefits. When husbands stop paying attention to their wives, the wives may stop nagging them, begin to withdraw emotionally, and make plans to walk away (they decide the benefits of the marriage don't exceed the costs). The husbands, who may have been relieved at the reduced nagging (more benefits, fewer costs), are then surprised when the wife walks out the door. Have you seen this kind of behavior happen in marriages that to all appearances seemed to be stable relationships? ◀

Even so, the feminist perspective has had some important cultural and political consequences. Just three of many are the following:

■ **Emphasis on Equality:** Feminists have insisted that spouses should be equal partners, that wives should not have to do more household and child-care tasks than their husbands, and that family leave should be available for both partners. They have also promoted the view that fathers have a great impact on the rearing of children. They have insisted on more equality in divorce laws. They have worked to secure reproductive rights.

■ **No One Size of Family:** Challenging the view (especially of the structural functionalists) that husbands should be breadwinners and wives should be homemakers, feminists have pushed for an expanded definition of the family, including single parents, same-sex unions, stepfamilies, and grandparents and grandchildren, all representing various races and ethnicities.

■ **Reduction in Harassment and Violence:** A critical feminist contribution has been the insistence that society needs to pay close attention to eliminating sexual harassment, domestic violence, and assaults against children. This has led to changing policies in police handling of domestic disturbances, the issuing of restraining orders by courts, and medical scrutiny of women and children who are treated for bruises and beatings.



**THE FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE.** If this woman is unaware of the men ogling her legs, does that make their behavior acceptable? What would scholars holding the feminist perspective probably say about this picture? ►



## Men's Studies

Before feminist studies emerged, social scientists mistakenly tended to generalize the results of research involving just males to be applicable to *both* males and females. The contribution of feminist scholars, therefore, was to point up that women's experiences were different in many social areas—voting, crime, education, and so on.

However, in one field of study, that of the family, it was the reverse: Often the *men* were overlooked. That is, traditional scholars had studied the family as though men were not significant parts of it and studied men as though their family lives were not important. Recently, there has begun to be increased attention to studying how men's experiences are influenced by societal ideas about what a man is supposed to be. In addition, men are being studied for their roles within the family—as husbands, fathers, sons, ex-spouses, and so on.

Although men's studies is a relatively new discipline, it already has its own scholarly institutions, such as the American Psychological Association's Division 51, the Society for the Psychological Study of Men and Masculinity. The Men's Studies Press publishes three journals: *Fathering*, *International Journal of Men's Health*, and *The Journal of Men's Studies*.

## 7. The Ecological Perspective: The Family Is Influenced by & Influences Its Environment

**The ecological perspective examines how a family (or individual) is influenced by and influences its environment.** The ecological perspective, which is one of the newer perspectives in sociology and psychology and which embodies *both* macro-level and micro-level orientations, believes that human behavior is influenced by immediate and distant environments, ranging from, say, the family and child-care arrangements up to school, government, and



urch, then all the way to the earth's physical-biological environment (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Bubolz and Sontag 1993).

## Applying the Perspective

The influence of emotional messages delivered through a television screen on infant behavior can be observed in babies as young as 12 months old (Mumme and Fernald 2003). After babies watched a short videotape of an adult actress interacting to a toy with a show of either positive or negative emotion, 1-year-old infants displayed similar emotions in interacting with the toy. "They are able to pick up where a person is looking, and, of course, they pick up the emotion," said Donna L. Mumme, the lead author on the study. "It was quite striking to us that 1-year-olds were able to gather that much information from a 15-second television clip" (Mumme, quoted in Goode 2003: D5). A more recent study (Christakis et al. 2004) of 1,300 infants and toddlers suggests that the more TV young children watch, the more they are apt to have trouble paying attention and concentrating during their early school years.

Adherents of the ecological perspective might say that these experiments demonstrate how individuals grow and adapt through interchanges with their surroundings, whether that of their parents (immediate environment) or that of the mass media (more remote environment).

## 3. The Family Development Perspective: Individuals & Families Change through Stages of Life

Embodying both macro- and micro-level orientations, the *family development perspective* proposes that family members accomplish developmental tasks as they move through stages in the family life cycle. There are several variations on the family life cycle, but the best known is that of Evelyn Duvall (1957), author of *Family Development*, who proposed eight stages: (See ■ Panel 2.6.) Another important researcher is Monica McGoldrick, who proposes a five-stage life family life cycle (McGoldrick et al. 1993). In a

### ■ PANEL 2.6 Eight Stages in the Family Life Cycle

1. Married couple: no children
2. Child-bearing family—lasts about 2½ years: oldest child younger than 30 months old
3. Family with preschoolers—lasts about 3½ years: oldest child 2½–6 years old
4. Family with school children—lasts about 7 years: oldest child 6–13 years old
5. Family with adolescents—lasts about 7 years: oldest child 13–20 years old
6. Family as launching center—lasts about 8 years: oldest child an adult and children "launched" into independence
7. Single-age family: empty nest—no children
8. Aging family: from retirement to death of one or both spouses

Adapted from Duvall 1957.



*family life cycle*, members' roles and relationships change, largely depending on how they have to adapt to the absence or presence of child-rearing responsibilities.

## Applying the Perspective

A key contribution of the family development perspective is that family members have to accomplish ***developmental tasks***—**fulfill specific role expectations and responsibilities as they move through the life cycle** (Duvall and Miller 1985). For example, in stage 1, you and your partner must establish a mutually satisfying marriage, fit into the kinship network, and adjust to pregnancy and the promise of parenthood. During stage 3, you must fit into the community of school-age families and encourage children's educational achievement. In stage 5, you must help teenagers mature and emancipate themselves as well as establish postparental careers and interests. In stage 7, middle age, you must rebuild the marriage relationship and maintain kinship ties with older and younger generations.

Of course, you can probably see that there are many facts of life that don't fit neatly into this life cycle. How, for example, do you apply this perspective to single-parent families, childless couples, and grandparent-grandchild families? How does the fact of divorce change the developmental tasks? We consider these matters elsewhere.

## Is Any Perspective Better Than Any Other?

If you are confronted with a relationship or a family that is clearly not doing well, which perspective would you be inclined to take—or to take first? All of these have their value, but all also have drawbacks.

### Pluses & Minuses

There are many critiques we might make here, but let us describe just the most important ones:

• **Structural Functional:** The structural-functional perspective held sway in the 1950s and 1960s and helped to formulate ideas about order and stability in families as well as how politics, law, and economics affect the family structure.

This perspective has been faulted, however, for viewing the family narrowly as a harmonious unit with shared values and in regarding divorce as disintegration rather than as indicating possible positive change (Mann et al. 1997). It also has been criticized for not focusing enough on everyday interactions of individuals.

• **Conflict:** The conflict perspective offers a refreshing alternative to the structural-functionalist view that existing family structures benefit society. That is, conflict theorists ask us to look at who, in fact, benefits from these structures.

Yet this view has also been faulted for stressing conflict over order and for holding that differences lead to conflict rather than (as often happens) to acceptance and cooperation.



■ **Symbolic Interactionist:** In contrast to the preceding perspectives, the symbolic interactionist view focuses attention on the daily interactions of members of a family.

For this reason, however, it has also been faulted for ignoring larger social influences on the family such as economic and political forces. Critics also complain that, despite its close-up view, it doesn't focus enough on personality, temperament, and power. Finally, it appears to emphasize individual happiness over familial values such as duty and stability (Schvaneveldt 1981).

■ **Family System:** The family system perspective focuses on interconnectedness and emphasizes the importance of the pieces (family members) to the whole (the family). It also stresses the dynamic aspects of a family, in which a change sets in motion an attempt to restore equilibrium.

However, many scholars have trouble even agreeing on what the family systems perspective is (Melito 1985). This viewpoint also grew out of therapeutic and clinical work with dysfunctional families, so there is some debate as to whether those results can be applied to functional families. Finally, it does not draw greatly on the effects of wider social, economic, and political forces on a given family.

■ **Social Exchange:** The social exchange perspective allows family relationships to be evaluated in terms of benefits and costs, thereby stressing the importance of individual choice and the notion that group phenomena and the social structure derive from individual actions.

However, this perspective has been criticized for assuming that people always act in rational, calculating ways. It also has been faulted for emphasizing individual self-serving over altruism and family values.

■ **Feminist:** The feminist perspective, which embraces a variety of viewpoints, brought needed attention to the fact that family roles and male and female roles are constructs of society—roles often created by men to maintain their own power.

On the other hand, this perspective has been criticized for stressing personal feelings over objectivity and emphasizing observation and interviewing instead of quantitative (statistical) research (Maynard 1994).

■ **Ecological:** The ecological perspective is valuable because it stresses the interaction of families and their political and societal environments.

However, it is not always easy to tell how environments exert such changes on families, especially alternative family groups such as stepfamilies or same-sex family groups (Ganong et al. 1995; Klein and White 1996).

■ **Family Development:** The family development perspective focuses on the family rather than on the individuals in it and emphasizes the importance of successful completion of developmental tasks. The viewpoint has been useful in providing insights about the two-parents-with-children nuclear family.

The perspective has been criticized because the processes of life do not always unfold in such clearly marked stages (Winton 1995). It has also been tilted toward white, middle-class families (Hogan and Astone 1986). In addition, the concept of a family life cycle has ignored other kinds of families, such as single parents, divorced parents, and same-sex households (Laird 1993; Rodgers and White 1993; Slater 1995).



## Different Folks, Different Families

Today, as we mentioned, the family is no longer just the nuclear family of one breadwinner, one homemaker, and one or more children. North America has become a region of different varieties of families: Both intact, enduring families and serial-marriage families. One-earner families and two-earner families. Childless households and multigenerational households. Dual parents and single parents. Biological parents and adoptive parents. Young families and second- (or third-) time-around families. Heterosexual parents and gay and lesbian parents. Parents who are intimately involved with their children and parents who can't handle the responsibility. Singles and couples who live in isolation and individuals and families who open their homes and hearts to all comers. In the rest of this book, we apply the tools of scientific research and the theoretical perspectives just described to these fascinating subjects.



# Self-Assessment: Gaining Self-Knowledge from the Harvard Project Implicit Website

Many of us state that we are not prejudiced, that we keep an open mind. What about unconscious prejudices, especially those that could negatively affect our chances for having satisfying intimate relationships?

Harvard University, the University of Virginia, and the University of Washington are conducting an online survey called Project Implicit to examine thoughts and feelings that exist either outside conscious awareness or outside conscious control. This project is for educational and research purposes only. The range of topics that you will be questioned about at their website should provide you with a great variety of experiences and an opportunity to think about topics that are very important to you or about issues that you have not yet had the occasion to consider.

To participate in Project Implicit, go to <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/research/index.jsp>. You will be asked to register, which is free and requires only that you fill out a brief, confidential form and that you have an email address, which becomes your sign-in ID for subsequent sessions. Then you can begin. Each ques-

tion session lasts about 10 minutes and requires you to assign a positive or a negative value to each of two topics. The topics appear randomly, and you can skip any that you do not like or that you are not interested in. Examples are *married/unmarried*, *male/female*, *religious/atheist*, *geek/nerd*, *books/television*, *feminism/tradition*, *conservative/liberal*, *young/old*, *rich/poor*. After you have finished each session, you will receive feedback about your preferences and/or prejudices—and you might be surprised!

You will also be providing useful information for research about personal preferences on a large variety of topics.

After you finish each of the remaining chapters in this book, take a few minutes to return to the Harvard Project Implicit site and find out more about yourself. As you proceed through this course, print out your results or take a few notes, and then recheck them after the course is finished. Perhaps you will discover that some of your preferences and/or prejudices have changed.

## Key Terms Used in This Chapter

- |                               |                                         |                                   |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| adolescence, p. 41            | expressive role, p. 71                  | macro-level orientation, p. 69    |
| appeal to authority, p. 57    | fallacy, p. 56                          | magical thinking, p. 52           |
| appeal to pity, p. 57         | false cause, p. 57                      | manifest functions, p. 71         |
| arguments, p. 56              | family development perspective, p. 79   | matriarchal family, p. 40         |
| case study method, p. 63      | family life cycle, p. 80                | matrilineal, p. 39                |
| circular reasoning, p. 57     | family systems perspective, p. 74       | micro-level orientation, p. 71    |
| clinical research, p. 62      | feminist perspective, p. 76             | mindfulness, p. 58                |
| companionate family, p. 46    | generalized, p. 62                      | mindlessness, p. 58               |
| conclusion, p. 56             | Hawthorne effect, p. 64                 | nonparticipant observation, p. 64 |
| conflict perspective, p. 73   | heterosexism, p. 67                     | nonrepresentative sample, p. 61   |
| content analysis, p. 66       | historical study, p. 65                 | observational research, p. 63     |
| control group, p. 65          | independent variable, p. 65             | participant observation, p. 64    |
| critical thinking, p. 54      | inductive argument, p. 56               | patriarchal family, p. 40         |
| cross-cultural study, p. 65   | instrumental role, p. 71                | patrilineal, p. 39                |
| deductive argument, p. 56     | interviewer bias, p. 62                 | population, p. 61                 |
| dependent variable, p. 65     | irrelevant attack on an opponent, p. 57 | premises, p. 56                   |
| developmental tasks, p. 80    | irrelevant reason, p. 57                | puberty, p. 40                    |
| ecological perspective, p. 78 | jumping to conclusions, p. 56           | random sample, p. 61              |
| ethnocentrism, p. 66          | latent functions, p. 71                 | reasoning, p. 56                  |
| experiment, p. 64             | longitudinal study, p. 66               | reliability, p. 68                |
| experimental group, p. 65     |                                         | representative sample, p. 61      |
| experimental research, p. 64  |                                         | sample, p. 61                     |



secondary analysis, p. 66  
 slippery slope, p. 57  
 social exchange perspective,  
 p. 75  
 socialization, p. 72  
 stratified random sample, p. 61

straw man argument, p. 57  
 structural-functional perspective,  
 p. 71  
 survey research, p. 61  
 symbolic interaction perspective,  
 p. 73

theory, p. 69  
 Thomas theorem, p. 74  
 validity, p. 68  
 variable, p. 64

## Summary

### 2.1 A Short History of Marriage

- Family in America can be viewed from the perspective of (1) the early American era, (2) the 19th and early 20th centuries, and (3) the modern era.
- The early American family can be considered according to four groups: (1) Native American families, (2) white colonial families, (3) African American families, and (4) Hispanic (Latino) families.
- Native American families included both family structures: matrilineal (children traced their descent through their mother's line) and patrilineal (descent traced through the father's line). Females were usually married at ages 12–15, males at ages 15–20, and couples chose their partners, although marriages were also arranged by parents. High infant mortality rates kept families small, but children were welcomed and participated in many rites of passage while growing up.
- White colonial families, who were primarily of British, French, Spanish, and Portuguese origin, adhered to a Christian-influenced family model that emphasized sexual restraint, a patriarchal structure in which the father held power, and mate selection by parental arrangement rather than by love. The family was considered primarily an economic unit for producing goods and a social unit for taking care of family members, including the widowed, orphaned, aged, and sick. Some middle-class boys were given instruction in writing, arithmetic, reading, and religion; girls were given only minimal education. Adolescence as a stage of social and psychological development did not exist. Instead, children were viewed as miniature adults whose labor was to be exploited.
- The first African families to appear in North America were not slaves but indentured servants who, after fulfilling their years of service, could own land, marry, and hire out their labor. By the mid-17th century, however, the majority of black immigrants were slaves brought primarily from West Africa. Though prohibited from marrying, slaves found rituals to legitimize marriage among themselves. Slave families were stronger than was once believed; adversity produced strong attachments between fathers and mothers and healthy kinship networks.
- Although Hispanic (Latino) families appeared in North America even before the New England Pilgrims, they lost most of their land through confiscation and fraud and became laborers exploited in the economic development of the Southwest. Influenced by Catholic teaching, family life stressed many rites of passage of religious significance, such as baptism, first communion, confirmation, and quinceañera as well as marriage. Socialization of children was very traditional, girls being taught to be wives and mothers and boys being brought up according to the concept of machismo, which emphasized male dominance, pride, and sexual prowess. The Latino family structure was also strongly influenced by familism.
- Families in the 19th and early 20th centuries were dramatically influenced by social and economic forces, including industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. The main impact of industrialization was to shift the production of goods from the home and human labor to machines and factories located mostly in urban areas, which prompted population movement to the cities, which resulted in a housing shortage that produced a decreasing birth rate. The growth of mass transit gave working husbands and fathers more mobility, but it also reduced their close connection to and supervision of their children. Kinship networks enabled many immigrants and blacks to survive the adverse conditions of slavery, poverty, and unemployment.
- As more people began working outside the home, the view of the family as a work unit began to decline, women felt more free to choose marriage partners for compatibility and affection, and children became less important as economic contributors. Therefore, women began emphasizing child rearing over child-bearing, resulting in a declining birth rate.



- In the 20th century, many economic, educational, and social welfare functions began to be provided by outside agencies instead of families, and family members became more attentive to taking care of one another's emotional needs. Familism was replaced by individualism, and sexual attraction and compatibility became more important as the basis for middle-class marriage and family relationships. This led to the so-called companionate family, in which the purpose of marriage was to provide emotional growth, romance, and sexual fulfillment.
- In the last 100 years, the family has been changed by several social forces. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, formerly stay-at-home mothers were forced to seek employment, a trend that had begun during World War I, when able-bodied men were called to serve in the military, and that was reinforced during World War II. The shift of women into formerly male-oriented jobs helped to change traditional views of women as being mainly wives and mothers.
- The 1950s marked a return to traditional family values, as a booming economy impelled families to seek the good life in the suburbs and a stable household with a working father and stay-at-home mother. The Baby Boom years, 1946–1964, witnessed a massive population explosion that now constitutes approximately one-third of the U.S. population.
- Immigration continues to be a major factor shaping the nature of the American family. There has been a significant shift in the composition of the immigrant population from primarily European to Asian and Latin American-born groups.

## 2.2 Learning How to Think: Keys to Being Open-Minded

- Being raised in a particular culture makes it difficult for us to step outside and objectively analyze how our family and other relationships work. The emotional nature of love and intimacy also makes it hard to have a clear understanding. Our socialization and individual life experiences result in a mind-set that affects our perceptions.
- Open-mindedness requires avoiding magical thinking and developing critical thinking skills. Critical thinking means clear thinking, skeptical thinking, and active thinking. It is actively seeking to understand, analyze, and evaluate information in order to solve problems. Critical thinking skills can be learned. They involve four steps: (1) getting an understanding of the problem, (2) gathering information

and interpreting it, (3) developing a solution plan and carrying it out, and (4) evaluating the plan's effectiveness.

- The best way to break through the closed habits of thought or mind-sets is to use reasoning, which involves the use of arguments. Arguments consist of one or more premises, or reasons, logically supporting a result or outcome called a conclusion. The two main types of correct or valid arguments are inductive and deductive.
- Objectivity is further prevented by mindlessness—entrapment in old categories, automatic behavior, and acting from a single perspective. The opposite, mindful thinking, is characterized by the creation of new categories, being open to new information, and awareness of the existence of more than one perspective.

## 2.3 How Do You Know What's True? Learning to Evaluate Research Results

- To further enhance one's objectivity, it's important to understand the basic types of scientific research and the flaws that can affect them, as well as the blinders of one's own experiences. The five principal types of scientific research are (1) survey, (2) clinical, (3) observational, (4) experimental, and (5) cross-cultural, historical, longitudinal, and content analysis.
- Survey research uses questionnaires or interviews to collect data from small representative groups (samples); the questionnaires are then used to generalize conclusions that are valid for larger groups (populations). Samples may be representative, nonrepresentative, or stratified random samples. Information may be collected through questionnaires or interviews. In conducting interviews, researchers need to be aware that their own preconceptions can cause interviewer bias.
- Clinical research entails in-depth study of individuals or small groups who have sought counseling for psychological or relationship problems from mental health professionals. A significant amount of clinical research involves the use of case studies, reports derived from clinical practitioners working one on one with individuals or families using interviews, direct observations, and analysis of records.
- In observational research, researchers collect data by observing people in their natural surroundings. Observational research may be either participant observation (researchers interact naturally with the subjects they are observing but do not reveal that they are researchers) or nonparticipant observation



(researchers observe subjects without interacting with them). A drawback to observational research is the possible occurrence of the Hawthorne effect—subjects of research change their typical behavior because they realize they are being observed.

- In an experiment, factors or behaviors are measured or monitored under closely controlled circumstances. In experimental research, researchers try to isolate a single factor or behavior under controlled conditions to determine its influence. Experimenters employ the use of variables—factors or behaviors that can be manipulated and measured. Variables may be independent variables (factors that can be controlled or manipulated by the experimenter) or dependent variables (factors or behaviors that are affected by changes in the independent variables). To determine whether the dependent variable was truly affected by the independent variable, researchers use experimental groups that are exposed to the independent variable and control groups that are not exposed to the independent variable.
- Additional research methods include cross-cultural studies (social scientists compare data on family life from different cultures), historical studies (researchers compare census, social agency, or demographic data to ascertain changing patterns of family life), longitudinal studies (researchers use questionnaires or interviews over a number of years to follow up on earlier research), content analysis (systematic examination of cultural artifacts or various forms of communication to extract thematic data and draw conclusions about social life), and secondary analysis.
- Objectivity in research may be hindered or prevented through ethnocentrism, heterosexism, and bias against childlessness. Possible research flaws also occur when a researcher is biased, the sample is biased, no control group is used, questions are not neutrally worded, data are time sensitive, there are distortions on the part of the research subjects, and there are problems of reliability and validity.

## 2.4 Theoretical Perspectives on the Family

- Theories are perspectives that explain why processes and events occur. Eight perspectives for viewing mar-

riage and the family are (1) structural-functional, (2) conflict, (3) symbolic interaction, (4) family systems, (5) social exchange, (6) feminist/male studies, (7) ecological, and (8) family development.

- The structural-functional perspective views the family as a social institution that performs essential functions for society to ensure its stability. That is, the family is a source of socialization—the process by which offspring learn attitudes, beliefs, and values appropriate to their society and culture so they can function effectively in society. Traditional structural-functionalism views the male as being responsible for instrumental roles (he is the breadwinner, tough, hard-working, and competitive) and the female for expressive roles (homemaker and nurturer). Structural-functionalists identify manifest functions (those that are open, stated, and conscious) and latent functions (those that are unconscious or unintended).
- Conflict theory views individuals and groups as being basically in conflict with each other for power and scarce resources.
- The symbolic interaction perspective focuses on internal family interaction and the ongoing action and response of family members to one another.
- The family systems perspective suggests that family members make up a system of interconnected parts of a whole and that changes in one part change the other parts.
- The feminist perspective views the inequality in women's roles as the result of male dominance in the family and in society.
- The ecological perspective examines how a family (or individual) is influenced by and influences its environment.
- The social exchange perspective proposes that people's interactions represent the efforts of each person to maximize benefits and minimize costs.
- The family development perspective proposes that family members accomplish developmental tasks as they move through stages in the family life cycle, in which the roles and the relationships of family members change primarily according to how they have to adapt to the absence or presence of child-rearing responsibilities.



## Take It to the Net

Among the Internet resources on understanding the topics discussed in this chapter are the following:

**Allyn & Bacon Sociology Links.** Research methods and statistics.

[www.fsu.edu/~crimdo/soclinks/research.html](http://www.fsu.edu/~crimdo/soclinks/research.html)

[www.fsu.edu/~crimdo/soclinks/soclinks.html#spot](http://www.fsu.edu/~crimdo/soclinks/soclinks.html#spot)

**Intute.** Connection to thousands of social science websites.

[www.intute.ac.uk](http://www.intute.ac.uk)

**National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS).** As the nation's principal health statistics agency, NCHS is a great source of information about America's health.

[www.cdc.gov/nchs](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs)

- **Migration Information Source.** Offers tools and data on movement of people worldwide.  
[www.migrationinformation.org](http://www.migrationinformation.org)
- **Population Resource Center.** Promotes use of accurate population data and sound analysis.  
[www.prcdc.org](http://www.prcdc.org)
- **SocioSite.** Social science information. Links to home pages on social theory.  
[www.pscw.uva.nl/sociosite/TOPICS/theory.html](http://www.pscw.uva.nl/sociosite/TOPICS/theory.html)
- **Tiger Census.** Variety of illustrated maps powered by U.S. Census data.  
<http://tiger.census.gov>
- **U.S. Census Bureau.** Excellent website of the Census Bureau.  
[www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)