

Relationships, Families, and Households

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Losing a close friend, asking for support from family and friends at difficult times, falling in love, moving in with a roommate or partner, holding your newborn baby for the first time, breaking up with a partner of many years, struggling to understand a teenage son or daughter, and helping your mother to die with dignity and in peace are commonplace life events. These ties between us, as human beings, define the very texture of our personal lives. They are a source of much happiness, affirmation, and personal growth as well as frustration, misunderstanding, anxiety, and, sometimes, misery. This chapter looks at personal relationships—between women and men, women and women, parents and children—and the ways in which an idealized notion of family masks the reality of family life for many people in the United States. We argue that families—however they are defined—need to be able to care for their members and that specific forms are much less important than the quality of the relationships between people.

Defining Ourselves Through Connections with Others

As suggested in Chapter 2, personal and family relationships are central to individual development, the definition of self, and the ongoing development of our identities. This involves relying on others when we are very young and later negotiating with them for material care, nurturance, and security; defining our own voice, space, independence, and sense of closeness to others; and learning about ourselves, our family and cultural heritage, ideas of right and wrong, practical aspects of life, and how to negotiate the world outside the home. In the family we learn about socially defined **gender roles**: what it means to be a daughter, brother, wife, or father, and what is expected of us. Family resources, including material possessions, emotional bonds, cultural connections and language, and status in the wider community, are also

important for the experiences and opportunities they offer children.

How we are treated by parents and siblings and our observations of adult relationships during childhood provide the early foundation for our own adult relationships. Friends and family members may offer rules for dating etiquette. Magazine features and advice columns coach us in how to catch a man (or woman) (fashion magazines) and how to

marriages are a relatively recent phenomenon. Although most families in the United States no longer arrange a daughter's marriage, they usually have clear expectations of the kind of man they want her to fall in love with. The ideal of marriage as a committed partnership seems to hold across sexual orientation, with women looking for Mr. or Ms. Right. Marriage and motherhood are often thought to be an essential part of a woman's life, the

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and '90s by women for a mass women's readership. A sampling of titles includes *How to Get a Man to Make a Commitment or Know When He Never Will* (Barnes and Clarke 1986), *If I'm So Wonderful Why Am I Still Single? Ten Strategies That Will Change Your Love Life Forever* (Page 1988), *The Savvy Woman's Success Bible: How to Find the Right Job, the Right Man, and the Right Life* (Santi-Flaherty 1997), *How to Get Married After Thirty-five: The Game Plan for Love* (Rosenberg 1988), *He's Not All That! How to Attract the Good Guys* (Carle 2000), and *Date Like a Man: What Men Know about Dating and Are Afraid You'll Find Out* (Moore and Gould 2001). The ups and downs of personal relationships are the material of countless magazines, novels, movies, pop music, talk shows, reality TV shows (*Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?*), and sitcoms that increasingly include gay and lesbian characters (Reading 25). Many women value themselves in terms of whether they can attract and hold a partner. Whole sections of bookstores are given over to books and manuals that analyze relationship problems and teach "relationship skills"; counselors and therapists make a living helping us sort out our personal lives. Regardless of sexual orientation, we are all socialized in a heterosexual and heterosexist world, as argued by Adrienne Rich (1986a; see Ingraham 2004).

Marriage, Domestic Partnerships, and Personal Relationships

Young people in the United States currently face fundamental contradictions concerning intimate relationships, marriage, and family life. Marriage is highly romanticized: The partners marry for love and are expected to live happily ever after. Love

often still a stigma attached to being single in many cultural groups if a woman remains unmarried after a certain age.

Women marry for many reasons, following cultural and religious precepts. They may believe that marriage will make their relationship more secure or provide a stronger foundation for their children. There are macro-level material benefits in terms of taxes, health insurance, pension rights, ease of inheritance, and immigration status. In 1997, the U.S. General Accounting Office found no less than 1,049 federal laws in which benefits, rights, and privileges are contingent on marital status. At the micro and meso levels marriage provides recognition, validation, and a sense of personal empowerment. It is the conventional and respected way of publicly affirming one's commitment to a partner and being supported in this commitment by family and friends, as well as societal institutions. However, under the excitement and romance of the wedding and despite the fact that many partnerships are thriving, marriage as an institution is taking a buffeting, mainly because of changes in the economy and changing ideas of women's role in society (Reading 46; also Coontz 1997; Risman 1998; Skolnick 1991).

Women on welfare are being urged into marriage, however. Given that two-parent families have higher incomes than single parents, the framers of this policy reason that marriage will lift single mothers out of poverty, and the federal government has made millions of dollars available to states for marriage promotion programs. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act that provides for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) declares that "marriage is the foundation of a successful society"

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(quoted in Mink 2002). TANF eligibility rules "can include mandatory enrollment in marriage classes and couples counseling" (Mink 2002). Incentives can be paid to mothers who marry. Moreover, states that reduce births to unmarried women without resorting to abortions can receive "illegitimacy bonuses." Mothers receiving welfare are subject to severe bureaucratic intrusion into their personal lives and their ability to make decisions for themselves and their families. They are required to disclose the identity of their child's father and to pursue a child support order against him, regardless of whether they want the men in their lives.

Contradictions Surrounding the Institution of Marriage

As marriage has become less necessary for many women, the wedding industry has grown enormously (Geller 2001; Ingraham 1999). Weddings are a mainstay of popular culture. A very small sampling of successful wedding films includes *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Monsoon Wedding*, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, *The Wedding Banquet*, and *The Wedding Singer*. TV shows also include weddings, especially as the climax of a series. Weddings of movie stars, public figures, and royalty are featured in media photo spreads that make use of the "fairy tale formula familiar to many—especially women—since early childhood" (Ingraham 1999, p. 127). Magazines like *Bride's*, wedding experts and managers, bridal-gown designers, florists, jewelers, photographers, and stationery specialists are all part of a highly profitable wedding industry. The average U.S. wedding has 168 guests and costs \$22,360 (Mother Jones 2005, p. 24). Note that this current emphasis on weddings comes at a time when the institution of heterosexuality is under pressure from feminists and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender movement. Autobiographical writings on marriage by heterosexual women reflect these contradictions, and also affirm the authors' decisions to marry (Cohen 2001; Corral and Miya-Jervis 2001; Nissinen 2000).

Compared with their mothers or grandmothers, fewer U.S. women are marrying, and many of those who do are marrying later, though they may be involved in committed relationships that last longer than many marriages. In 2003, 75 percent of women between the ages of 20 and 24, and 40 percent aged

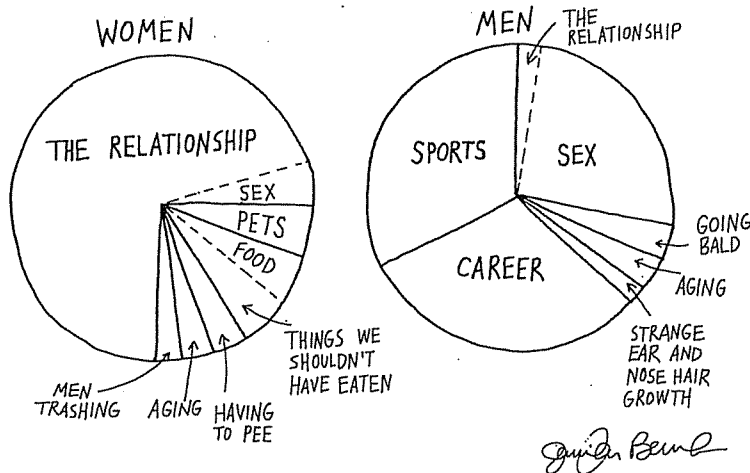
between 25 and 29 had never married. From 1970 to 2003, the proportion of women who never married went up from 55 percent to 75 percent for women aged 20 to 24; doubled for those aged 25 to 29 (from 19 percent to 40 percent); and more than doubled for women aged 30 to 34 (from 9 percent to 22 percent) (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2004). Though some research suggests that the vast majority of young people want to marry, a growing number of them see marriage as financially unattainable. For others it may be a longer-term goal. Middle-class women are putting off marriage as well as childbearing. Sociologists Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas found that some low-income women choose to have children while they are young as a way of achieving one of their life goals. They hope for marriage sometime in the future when they have more economic stability (Edin and Kefalas 2005).

Others oppose marriage as the institutionalization of social and economic inequalities between men and women. As Naomi Wolf notes in Reading 23, under English and subsequently U.S. law, a husband and wife were one person in law; married women and children were literally the property of their husbands and fathers. Not for nothing was it called *wedlock*. Jaclyn Geller (2001, Chapter 1) gives a detailed history of marriage as a patriarchal institution between fundamentally unequal partners. She views marriage as the paradigmatic institution that makes heterosexuality appear natural and "normal," and as a heterosexual woman she vehemently opposes it. Sociologist Pepper Schwartz (1994) advocates peer marriage—a marriage of equal companions who collaborate to produce "profound intimacy and mutual respect" (p. 2), a model that many young women embrace.

Personal Relationships: Living in Different Worlds?

Other commentators and theorists assume a basic inequality between men and women in personal relationships, though they do not critique the institution of heterosexuality. Therapist John Gray, the author of several best-sellers, including *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (1992), argues that men and women are socialized differently and have different styles of communication. He assumes that women as a group are naturally giving and caring

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and that men as a group are “wired up” to be providers, an assumption we reject, favoring a social constructionist view of gender as something learned rather than innate (see Chapter 1). Sociolinguist Deborah Tannen (1990) bases her work on the premise that boys and girls grow up in essentially different cultures. She analyzes everyday conversations between men and women to make sense of the “seemingly senseless misunderstandings that haunt our relationships” (p. 13). She argues that, for men, conversations are negotiations about independence; for women they are about connection and closeness. Partners in heterosexual relationships, she notes, are “living with asymmetry,” and each can benefit from learning the other’s conversational styles and needs (p. 287).

Sexuality is one of the few recognized ways in this society for people to make intimate connections, especially for men, who are not socialized to express emotions easily. In her groundbreaking research into men’s and women’s attitudes to sexuality and love, Shere Hite (1994) found that for her male respondents, dating and marriage are primarily about sex and that they often shop around for varied sexual experiences. For Hite’s women respondents, expressing emotion through sexual intimacy and setting up a home were usually much more important than they were for men. Hite attributes

much of the frustration in personal relationships to these very different approaches. She argues that many women give up on their hope for an emotionally satisfying relationship and settle for companionship with a male partner, while devoting much of their emotional energy elsewhere: to their children, work, or other interests. At the same time, she sees women as “revolutionary agents of change” in relationships, working with men to renegotiate this intimate part of their lives. Naomi Wolf’s discussion of radical heterosexuality (Chapter 4) is also relevant here.

Personal relationships always include an element of power, though in more egalitarian relationships this shifts back and forth. Social psychologist Hilary Lips (1991) describes this power imbalance in terms of “the principle of least interest” (p. 57), a concept taken from social exchange theory. The person who has the least interest in a relationship—in a heterosexual relationship, often the man—has the most power in it. The least-interested person’s moods, wants, and needs will tend to be dominant. This principle is also applicable at the macro level. As a group, women learn that it is our job to catch a man. In dating relationships we often assume the principle of greatest interest, the place of least power. This approach is also useful in thinking about LGBT relationships: does the principle of

least interest if so, how?

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Lesbians sexual couple campaigned ship—to b insurance, fo partner’s pen 2003, 200 of domestic-par partners, incl Chevron, Cos com, and We Foundation : governments mestic-partne saw a flurry setts, the only same-sex coup som authorize the California the year. This and contested riage laws are

least interest operate among same-sex couples, and if so, how?

Gay Marriage and Domestic Partnership

Through committed long-term partnerships, concerted lobbying, major national demonstrations, and direct action, lesbians and gay men have emphasized the validity of their families. More gay and lesbian couples are celebrating their relationships in commitment ceremonies, and the *New York Times*, for example, publishes these announcements together with wedding announcements. Demands for gay marriage in the interests of equal treatment for lesbians, gay men, and heterosexual couples provide an interesting counterweight to feminist critiques of marriage as inherently patriarchal. In 1996 the U.S. Congress passed an anti-gay marriage bill, the Defense of Marriage Act, that excludes same-sex couples from receiving federal protections and rights of marriage. Even if states allowed gay marriage, the Defense of Marriage Act would block gay partners from receiving federal benefits. Not all lesbians or gay men want to marry, understanding that "legalizing gay and lesbian marriage will not 'dismantle the legal structure of gender in every marriage'" (Polikoff 1993; also Reading 41 and Gomez 2000).

Lesbians and gay men, together with heterosexual couples who have chosen not to marry, have campaigned for the benefits of "domestic partnership"—to be covered by a partner's health insurance, for example, or to be able to draw the partner's pension if he or she dies. As of December 2003, 200 of the Fortune 500 companies offered domestic-partnership health benefits for same-sex partners, including AT&T, Chase Manhattan Bank, Chevron, Costco Wholesale, Mobil, Microsoft, Viacom, and Wells Fargo (Human Rights Campaign Foundation 2004). The list of state and local governments and academic institutions offering domestic-partnership benefits continues to grow. 2004 saw a flurry of same-sex weddings in Massachusetts, the only state that issues marriage licenses to same-sex couples. San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom authorized same-sex weddings in February, but the California Supreme Court banned this later in the year. This issue will continue to be contentious and contested. Advocates argue that mixed-sex marriage laws are discriminatory and unjust, denying

same-sex couples the many legal, economic, and social benefits that privilege heterosexual marriages. Some suggest that same-sex marriage, without traditional gender roles, can provide a more equitable model of marriage in the wider society. Some opponents contend that same-sex marriage defiles the sanctity of heterosexual marriage and heterosexual families (see Reading 46). Amy Gluckman (2004) opposes same-sex marriage as a privatized solution for basic supports such as medical insurance and pension plans that should be provided universally. In Reading 41, Paula Ettelbrick argues against marriage for gay men and lesbians and contends that the goals of gay liberation must be much broader than the right to marry. Political science professor Mary Shanley (2004), also questions the whole institution of marriage that same-sex couples seek to enter and propose other arrangements that would offer personal freedoms and supports for committed relationships—gay or straight—such as civil unions, universal care-giving partnerships, "nonconjugal relationships of economic and emotional interdependency," and polyamorous relationships (Shanley 2004, p. 112).

As of August 2005, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Rhode Island, and the District of Columbia have no explicit provisions prohibiting marriages between individuals of the same sex. Vermont and Connecticut have statewide laws that provide state-level spousal rights to same-sex couples within the state, as civil unions; Hawai'i, Maine, and New Jersey have statewide laws that provide some spousal rights to unmarried couples; California has a statewide law that provides almost all state-level spousal rights to unmarried couples who register domestic partnerships (Human Rights Campaign Foundation 2005).

College-educated women in their twenties, thirties, and forties have grown up with much more public discussion of women's rights than did their mothers and with expanded opportunities for education and professional work. Those who work in corporate or professional positions have more financial security in their own right than did middle-class housewives of the 1950s, for example, and are less interested in what sociologist Judith Stacey (1996) calls "the patriarchal bargain." Older women, born in the 1920s and brought up during the Great Depression of the 1930s, often valued material security with a man who would be a good

provider above emotional closeness or sexual satisfaction. Nowadays, many women expect much more intimacy in personal relationships than did their mothers, which places increased pressure on marriage and intimate relationships.

As we grow as individuals, our personal relationships may also develop in ways that continue to sustain us. Sometimes they cannot support our changing needs and concerns, and we may have to make the difficult decision to leave. Making a marriage or committed relationship "work" involves some combination of loving care, responsibility, communication, patience, humor, and luck. Material circumstances may have a significant impact, especially over the longer term. Having money, food, personal security, a home, reliable and affordable child care, and additional care for elderly relatives; being willing and able to move for a job or a chance to study; and having good health are examples of favorable circumstances. Negative factors that especially affect young African American women and Latinas are the high unemployment rates for men of color and the fact that roughly 30 percent of young African American and Latino men between 18 and 25 are caught up in the criminal justice system.

The couple may look to each other as friends, partners, and lovers and expect that together they can provide for each other's material and emotional needs and fulfill their dreams. In addition to experiencing the joy and satisfaction of sharing life on a daily basis, the partnership may also bear the brunt of work pressures, money worries, changing gender roles, or stress from a violent community, as well as difficulties due to personal misunderstandings, different priorities, or differing views of what it means to be a husband or a wife.

Half of U.S. marriages end in divorce, usually initiated by women, for reasons of incompatibility, infidelity, mistreatment, economic problems, or sexual problems (Kurz 1995). Many women experience the breakup with a mixture of fear, excitement, relief, and a sense of failure. Most divorced or widowed men marry within a year of the end of their previous relationship, often marrying women younger than themselves. Women wait longer to remarry, and fewer do. The majority of older men are married, while the majority of older women are widows. Being old and alone is something that women often fear, though some older women feel

good about their relative autonomy, especially if they are comfortable financially and have support from family members or friends, as mentioned in Chapter 3.

Motherhood and Parenting

Because women are daughters, we all have some perspective on motherhood through the experience of our own mothers or other women who mothered us. Many people regard motherhood as the ultimate female experience and disapprove of women who do not want to be mothers, especially if they are married. Magazines and advertising images invariably show happy, smiling mothers who dote on their children and buy them their favorite foods, cute clothes, toys, videos, CDs, and so forth.

Like marriage, motherhood is also undergoing change. Generally, women in more affluent families have fewer children, across all racial groups. Roughly a third of all babies born in the United States are to unmarried women. Percentages vary considerably by race. Far fewer Chinese American and Japanese American mothers are unmarried (9 percent and 10 percent, respectively), compared to Native American and Puerto Rican women (59 percent) (U.S. Census Bureau 2004, Table 78). More African American and Native American women are likely to have a child die in infancy, compared to White women, Latinas, and Asian Americans. Sharon Olds, Carol Gill and Larry Voss, and Ann Filemyr describe varied experiences of parenting (Readings 42, 43, 44, respectively). Rachel Aber Schlesinger (Reading 45) writes about the geographical and cultural contexts that have shaped the lives of Jewish grandmothers who migrated to North America and about their role in the transmission of culture to their grandchildren, who live in a very different time and place. Shailja Patel (Reading 47) describes how macro-level factors of British imperialism affected her family circumstances and attitudes. In the late nineteenth century, British administrators moved people from one colony to another as needed. Indian men, for example, were taken to Kenya to build railroads and used as a "buffer group" between the British elite and Kenyan Africans. They were allowed to stay on and go into business. By the 1970s,

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when Kenya gained political independence, many Kenyan Asians were relatively prosperous. They were highly unpopular in newly independent Kenya and ultimately forced to leave, throwing families into personal, economic, and political crisis.

More and more U.S. women are choosing not to have children or are having them later. Over half of all births occur to women in their twenties—the peak childbearing years—but the average age has shifted steadily upward. In 1970, the average age a woman had her first child was 21.4 years compared to 25 years in 2000. Analyzed by race these data show a wide spread: Native American women had the lowest average age at first birth (21.6 years) compared to Japanese and Chinese women (over 30 years) (Mathews and Hamilton 2002). In 2002, 44 percent of all women aged 15–44 had never had a child. In the older age group (40–44 years) this figure was 18 percent in 2002, up from 10 percent in 1976 (Downs 2003). Most of these women are childless on purpose, despite the idea, popularized in the media, that women are controlled by a “biological clock,” ticking away the years when conception is possible. Many of these women describe themselves as child-free rather than childless, highlighting that this is a positive choice for them (Bartlett 1994; Ireland 1993; Morrell 1994; Reti 1992; Safe 1996). They challenge the idea that women must have children to be fulfilled; they prefer instead to focus on intimate relationships, friendships, work, travel, community involvements, and connections with other people's children.

Rearing children is hard work, often tedious and repetitious, requiring humor and patience. Many women experience contradictory emotions, including fear, resentment, inadequacy, and anger about motherhood despite societal idealization of it and their own hopes or expectations that they will find it unreservedly fulfilling.

The Social Construction of Motherhood

Adrienne Rich (1986b) has argued that it is not motherhood itself that is oppressive to women, but the way our society constructs motherhood. A contemporary media image of a young mother with immaculate hair and makeup, wearing a chic business suit, briefcase in one hand and toddler in the other, may define an ideal for many young women. But it also

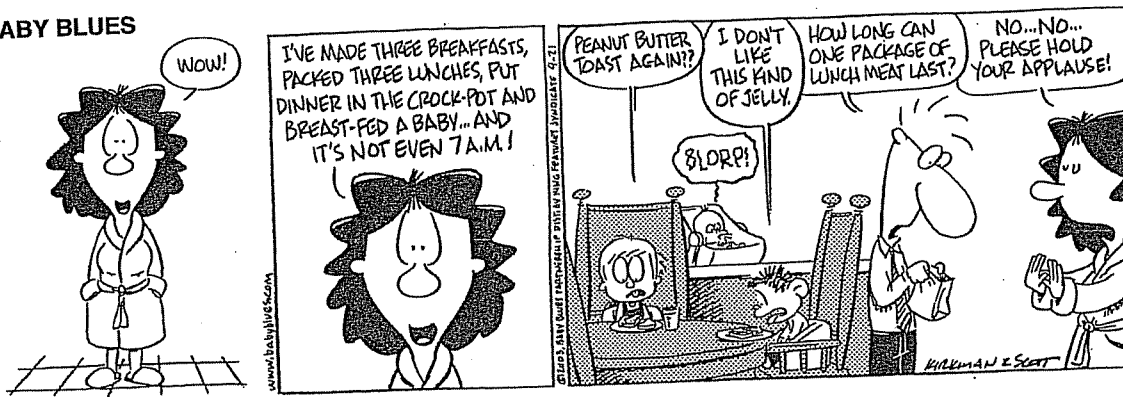
sets a standard that is virtually unattainable without causing the mother to come apart at the seams—that is, in the absence of a generous budget for convenience foods, restaurant meals, work clothes, dry cleaning, hairdressing, and good-quality child care. Despite contradictions and challenges, many women are finding joy and affirmation in motherhood (Abbey and O'Reilly 1998; Blakely 1994; Gore and Lavendar 2001; Hays 1996; Jetter, Orleck, and Taylor 1997; Kline 1997; Meyers 2001). In the early 1990s, writer and editor Ariel Gore started the upbeat zine, *Hip Mama*, as her senior project in college; highlights from the first ten years provide hilarious and heart-wrenching essays “from the cutting edge of parenting” (Gore 2004).

Motherhood has been defined differently at different times. During World War II, for example, when women were needed to work in munitions factories and shipyards in place of men drafted overseas, companies often provided housing, cafeterias, and child care to support these working women (Hayden 1981). After the war women were no longer needed in these jobs, and such facilities were largely discontinued. Psychologists began to talk about the central importance of a mother's care for the healthy physical and emotional development of children (Bowlby 1963). Invoking the notion of maternal instinct, some asserted that a mother's care is qualitatively different from that of others and that only a mother's love will do. Mothers who are not sufficiently “present” can be blamed for their children's problems. Ironically, mothers who are too present, said to be overidentified with their children and a source of negative pressure, are also blamed.

Blame It on the Mother

Mothers have been blamed for damaging their children psychologically, for bringing up children in poverty, for being lesbians, for marrying the wrong men, for divorce, for having children too young, for working outside the home, and for not working outside the home (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 1998). In 2000, 55 percent of women with infants under a year old were in the workforce, down from 59 percent in 1998. This represents the first decline in 25 years. The drop is primarily among women who are White, married, over 30, and educated (Gardner 2001). According to the

BABY BLUES



Department of Labor Women's Bureau (2005), 70 percent of mothers with children under 18 are in full-time work; 62 percent of mothers with children under 6 years of age are employed full-time. According to syndicated columnist Ellen Goodman (1999), "the cultural consensus still says that professional mothers should be home with the kids while welfare mothers should be out working." Psychologist Elizabeth Harvey's (1999) research on children aged 3 to 12 showed that those whose mothers were in the paid workforce during the first three years were *not* significantly different in terms of behavior, cognitive development, self-esteem, and academic achievement compared with those whose mothers were at home. Any slight differences disappeared by the time the children were of school age.

Despite the fact that so many mothers of young children are in the paid workforce today, working mothers, especially women of color, risk being called unfit and perhaps losing their children to foster homes or state agencies if they do not maintain some conventionally approved standard of family life. This is particularly true for mothers receiving TANF. States can sanction women and drop them from welfare rolls if they do not meet work requirements, do not disclose the identity of their child's father, or refuse to pursue child support orders. The states are entitled to use welfare money to determine whether children of sanctioned mothers are at risk of child abuse and neglect (Mink 2002). Throughout the 1990s, a series of news reports describing low-quality child-care facilities, including some cases in which children were said to have been sexually abused, contributed to the anxiety of working mothers.

The ideology of motherhood has been a persistent rationale for the unequal treatment of women in terms of access to education and well-paid, professional work, though it did not impede the employment of African American women, for example, as domestics and nannies in White people's homes or of White working-class women in factories. Not all of today's older women were able to choose whether or not to stay out of the paid workforce when their children were young. We take up the issue of juggling home and paid work in the next chapter.

Most women spend seventeen years of their lives, on average, taking care of children and eighteen years looking after their elderly parents or their husband's parents (Gould 1997). These periods overlap, usually when the children are in their teens. An additional factor complicating daily life is the high divorce rate, which means that parents and stepparents are involved in ongoing negotiations over shared child-care arrangements—often a source of hostility and stress. Women always suffer a serious drop in their standard of living immediately after divorce—hence the saying, "Poverty is only a divorce away"—whereas men's standard of living goes up (Peterson 1996). Usually mothers retain custody of the children even though fathers may see them on weekends or during school vacations. Roughly 50 percent of divorced fathers pay child support. Those who do not pay are often unemployed or in low-wage jobs. Children are affected emotionally and educationally by the ups and downs of parents' marital difficulties. Though a divorce may bring some resolution, children may have to adjust to a new

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home, school, neighborhood, a lowered standard of living, or a whole new family setup complete with stepparent, and stepbrothers or sisters. Most children suffer emotionally as a result of divorce but recover their equilibrium (Stewart et al. 1997), and the large majority of children of divorced parents grow up socially and psychologically well-adjusted (Hetherington and Clingempeel 1992; Hetherington and Kelly 2002).

The Ideal Nuclear Family

The family is a key social institution in which children are nurtured and socialized. In much public debate and political rhetoric, the family is touted as the centerpiece of American life. This idealized family, immortalized in the 1950s TV show *Leave It to Beaver*, consists of a heterosexual couple, married for life, with two or three children. The father is the provider while the wife/mother spends her days running the home. This is the family that is regularly portrayed in ads for such things as food, cars, cleaning products, or life insurance, which rely on our recognizing—if not identifying with—this symbol of togetherness and care. It is also invoked by conservative politicians who hearken back to so-called traditional family values. The copious academic and popular literature on the family emphasizes change—some say breakdown—in family life (Coontz 1992, 1997; Mintz and Kellogg 1988; Risman 1998; Skolnick 1991). Conservative politicians and religious leaders attribute many social problems to “broken homes,” so-called dysfunctional families, and moral decline, citing divorce rates, teen pregnancy rates, numbers of single-parent families, large numbers of mothers in the paid workforce, a lack of Christian values, and violence (Reading 46). In a *New York Times* article on single mothers, the steady increase in the rate of births to unmarried women since 1952 was called “a predictable metaphor for the fraying of America’s collective moral fiber” (Usdansky 1996). Note that this formulation employs a moral framework and implies moral and personal solutions mainly focused on the micro and meso levels. By contrast, from a socioeconomic perspective, changes in U.S. families are attributed to economic changes that have caused manufacturing jobs to be automated or moved overseas, a lack of adequate support for people in poverty, changing

Family Violence

- Up to 50 percent of all homeless women and children in this country are fleeing domestic violence.
- Approximately 1 out of every 25 elder persons is victimized annually. Of those who experience domestic elder abuse, 37 percent are neglected and 26 percent are physically abused. Of those who perpetrate the abuse, 30 percent are adult children of the abused person.
- As violence against women becomes more severe and more frequent in the home, children experience an increase in physical violence by the male batterer.
- Sixty-two percent of sons over the age of 14 were injured when they attempted to protect their mothers from attacks by abusive male partners. Women are 10 times more likely than men to be victims of violent crime in intimate relationships.

Source: National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (www.ncadv.org/resources/statistics/74.html).

economic stresses on personal and family relationships, increased levels of incarceration, and so forth.

Although this mythic family makes up only a small proportion of U.S. families, the prevalence of this ideal image has a strong ideological impact. It serves to both mask and delegitimize the real diversity of family forms and gives no hint of the incidence of family violence, or conflicts between work and caring for children. Sociologist Stephanie Coontz (1997) argues that nostalgia for the so-called traditional family is based on myths. Specifically, the post-World War II White, middle-class family was the product of a particular set of circumstances that were short-lived:

Fewer women remained childless during the 1950s than in any decade since the late nineteenth century. The timing and spacing of children became far more compressed, so that young mothers were likely to have two or more



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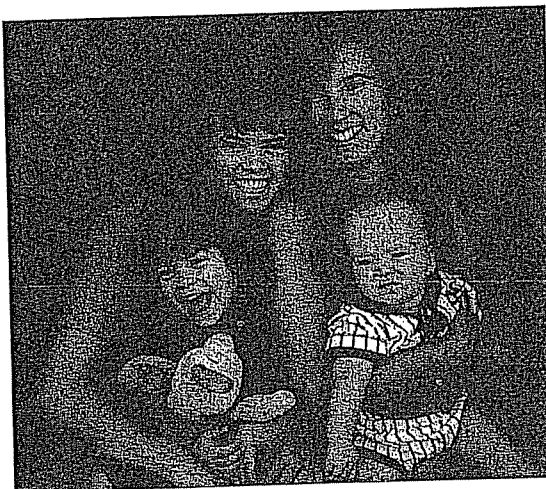
(p. 36)

Coontz (1997) argues that holding onto these nostalgic ideas creates problems for contemporary families. "The lag in adjusting values, behaviors, and institutions to new realities" can make for marital dissatisfaction and divorce, as well as inappropriate policy decisions (p. 109). Over the past three decades many women and men have been involved in some renegotiation of gender roles in relation to child care and other household responsibilities, a topic we discuss in more detail in the next chapter.

U.S. Families: Cultural and Historical Variations

The idealized family is assumed to provide a secure home for its members, what historian Christopher Lasch (1977) has called "a haven in a heartless world." For some this is generally true. For many women and children—in heterosexual and lesbian families—home is not a safe place but one where they experience emotional or physical violence through beatings, threats, or sexual abuse, as discussed in the previous chapter.

The ideal family, with its rigid gender-based division of labor, has always applied more to White families than to families of color. As cultural critic, teacher, and writer bell hooks (1984a) argues, many women of color and working-class White women have always had to work outside the home. Children are raised in multigenerational families, by divorced parents who have remarried, by adoptive parents, single parents (usually mothers), or grandparents. Eleanor Palo Stoller and Rose Campbell Gibson (1994) note that "when children are orphaned, when parents are ill or at work, or biological mothers are too young to care for their children alone other women take on childcare, sometimes temporarily, sometimes permanently" (p. 162). Sociologist Barbara Omolade (1986)



Pam and Lisa Liberty-Bibbens with McKenzie and Brennan

describes strong female-centered networks linking African American families and households, in which single mothers support one another in creating stable homes for their children. She challenges official characterization of this kind of family as "dysfunctional." Anthropologist Leith Mullings (1997) notes that women-headed households are an international phenomenon, shaped by global as well as local processes like the movement of jobs from industrialized to developing nations. In some families, one or both parents may have a disability, as described by Carol Gill and Larry Voss (Reading 43). Other families are split between countries through work, immigration, and war. Women leave their homes in the Philippines, for example, to work as caregivers for families in countries of the global North. These mothers are able to support their own children financially but rarely see them (Reading 55).

Single women (not all of whom are lesbians) have children through alternative insemination. Lesbians and gay men have established networks of friends who function like family. Some have children from earlier, heterosexual relationships; other gay and lesbian couples are fostering or adopting children (Drucker 1998; Goss and Strongheart 1997; Howey and Samuels 2000; Moraga 1997; Wells 2000). According to the Family Pride Coalition, an umbrella organization for gay and lesbian family support groups, at least 2 million gay and lesbian parents in

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the United States are raising between 3 million and 5 million children, most of them children of heterosexual marriages. The National Adoption Information Clearinghouse, a federal agency, puts the figures much higher—between 2.5 million and 8 million gay and lesbian parents, and 6 million to 14 million children (Lowy 1999). In Reading 44, journalist, teacher, and poet Ann Filemyr describes “loving across the boundary,” as a White woman in partnership with Essie, a woman of color, and comments that “by sharing our lives, our daily survival, our dreams and aspirations, I have been widened and deepened.” Their family includes Essie’s son and her grandmother. Filemyr makes insightful connections between their personal experiences, other people’s reactions to their multiracial household, and the impact of racism and heterosexism on their lives.

Besides providing for the care and socialization of children, families in the United States historically were also productive units. Before the onset of industrialization, work and home were not separated, as happened under the factory system, and women were not housewives but workers. Housework was directly productive in a home-based economy. In addition, women produced goods for sale—dyed cloth, finished garments, lace, netting, rope, furniture, and homemade remedies. Enslaved African women were involved in such production for their owners and sometimes also for their own families. Native American women were similarly involved in productive work for their family and community. Under such a family system both parents could integrate child care with their daily tasks, tasks in which children also participated. Indeed, childhood was a different phenomenon, with an emphasis on learning skills and responsibilities as part of a community, rather than on play or schooling.

Many shopkeeping and restaurant-owning families today—some of them recent immigrants, others the children or grandchildren of immigrants—continue to blend work and home.

Immigration and the Family

Chinese immigrant life in the United States was very different from these earlier family experiences. At first only Chinese men were allowed to enter the United States—to build roads and railroads, for example—creating a community of bachelors. Later, Chinese women were also permitted entry,

and the Chinatowns of several major cities began to echo with children’s voices for the first time.

Since 1952, U.S. immigration law and policy have allowed family members to join relatives in this country. This can be a lengthy process, and many families are split between the United States and their native countries. Men and women who migrate to this country often leave their children back home until they have gained a foothold here. Others send their children, especially teenagers, to the “old country” to keep them from the problems of life in the United States, as mentioned by Surina Khan (Reading 26). Some recent Chinese immigrant women, who work long hours for low pay in New York garment factories, are sending their infants back to China to be cared for by family members (Sengupta 1999). They lack affordable child care and the support of an extended family. The children are U.S. citizens by birth and are expected to return to this country when they are school age.

Women who are recent immigrants may be more affected by the customs of their home country, though younger immigrant women see coming to the United States partly in terms of greater personal freedom, as do many young women born here to immigrant parents. Differing aspirations and expectations for careers, marriage, and family life between mothers and daughters may lead to tensions between the generations, as exemplified in Amy Tan’s novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), and by Surina Khan (Reading 26). According to Stoller and Gibson (1994), many older Asian American women suffer both economic hardship and cultural isolation in this country. Recent elderly immigrants are also affected by cultural isolation, especially if they do not know English and their children and grandchildren are keen to become acculturated. First-generation immigrants who hold traditional views of family obligations, for example, may be disappointed by the treatment they receive from their Americanized children and grandchildren.

Feminist Perspectives on Marriage, Motherhood, and the Family

Marriage and family life are so much a part of our everyday lives, that many of us rarely stop to think much about them. Feminists often challenge commonplace beliefs about these bedrock social institutions that people may not even know they hold.

Challenging the Private/Public Dichotomy

A core idea in much U.S. political thought is that there is a dichotomy between the private and personal (dating, marriage, sexual habits; who does the housework, relationships between parents and children) and the public (religion, law, business). According to this view, these two spheres affect each other but are governed by different rules, attitudes, and behavior. The family, for example, is the place where love, caring, and sensitivity are assumed to come first. How a man treats his wife or children, then, is a private matter. A key aspect of much feminist theorizing and activism has been to challenge this public versus private dichotomy and to explain the family as a site of patriarchal power summed up in the saying "The working man's home is his castle." Every man may not be the most powerful person in the family, yet this is a culturally accepted idea. Such power may operate in relatively trivial ways—as, for example, when Mom and the kids cater to Dad's preferences in food or TV shows as a way of avoiding a confrontation. Usually, as the main wage earner and "head" of the family, men command loyalty, respect, and obedience. Some resort to violence or sexual abuse, as mentioned earlier. White, middle-class feminists like Betty Friedan (1963), who wrote about her dissatisfactions with suburban life and the boredom of being a full-time homemaker, which she described as "the problem which has no name," identify motherhood as a major obstacle to women's fulfillment. By contrast, working-class women—White women and women of color—name a lack of well-paying jobs, a lack of skills or education, and racism, not motherhood, as obstacles to their liberation.

Given the lower status of women in society, Jaclyn Geller (2001) points to marriage as a legal contract between unequal parties. As political scientist Susan Moller Okin (1989) notes, the much-repeated slogan "the personal is the political" is "the central message of feminist critiques of the public/private dichotomy" (p. 124). She lists four ways in which the family is a political entity:

1. Power is always an element of family relationships.
2. This domestic sphere is governed by external rules—for example, those concerning marriage and divorce, marital rape, or child custody.

3. It is in the family that much of our early socialization takes place and that we learn gender roles.
4. The division of labor within the family raises practical and psychological barriers against women in all other spheres of life.

(pp. 128–33)

Mothering and Maternal Thinking

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, feminist writing about motherhood increased enormously with an emphasis on the daily experience of mothering (Lazarre 1976; Rich 1976) and the symbolic meaning of motherhood (Chodorow 1978; Dinnerstein 1976). Adrienne Rich (1986b) advocated thinking of pregnancy and childbirth, a short-term condition, quite separately from child rearing, a much-longer-term responsibility. Psychologists Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein both advocated shared parenting as essential to undermining rigid gender roles, under which many men are cut off, practically and emotionally, from the organic and emotional concerns of children and dissociated from life processes. Two decades later, sociologists Pepper Schwartz (1994) and Barbara Risman (1998) made similar arguments.

Historian Laurie Umansky (1996) notes that maternalist rhetoric and imagery were central to much 1980s ecofeminism and women's peace activism. Examples include the Unity Statement of the Women's Pentagon Action (Reading 70, Chapter 11). Philosopher Sara Ruddick (1989) argued, further, that the experience and the work of mothering (whether by women or men) has the potential to generate principles of "maternal thinking" based on the desire to preserve life and foster growth. Such principles could serve as a blueprint for human interaction that would involve genuine peace and security. Responsible mothering has also led women to organize for better working conditions, improvements in welfare programs, and environmental justice (Jetter, Orleck, and Taylor 1997). Anthropologist Leith Mullings (1997) describes the transformative work of African American women she interviewed in New York in raising children and sustaining their households and communities as single parents. Sociologist Nancy Naples (1998, p. 113) uses the term "activist mothering" to explain the ways

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women community workers blend mothering, paid and unpaid labor, and political activism.

The Family and the Economic System

Other feminist theorists see the family as part of the economic system and emphasize its role in the reproduction of labor (Benston 1969; Dalla Costa and James 1972; Mitchell 1971; Zaretsky 1976). In this highly unsentimental view, marriage is compared to prostitution, whereby women trade sex for economic and social support. The family is deemed important for society because it is responsible for producing, nurturing, and socializing the next generation of workers and citizens, the place where children first learn to be "social animals." This includes basic skills like language and potty training and social skills like cooperation and negotiation with others or abiding by rules. Women's unpaid domestic work and child care, though not considered productive work, directly benefit the state and employers by turning out functioning members of society. The family also cares for its adult members by providing meals and clean clothes, as well as rest, relaxation, love, and sexual intimacy, so that they are ready to face another working day—another aspect of the reproduction of labor. Similarly, it cares for people who are not in the workforce, those with disabilities, the elderly, or the chronically ill. Still other theorists explain the family in terms of patriarchal power linked to a capitalist system of economic relations, with much discussion of exactly how these two systems are connected and how the gendered division of labor within the family first came about (Hartmann 1981; Jaggar 1983; Young 1980).

Policy Implications and Implementation

Many feminist scholars, policy makers, and activists have followed through on their analyses of women's roles in the family by taking steps to implement the policies they advocate. They have set up crisis lines and shelters for battered women and children across the country and made family violence and childhood sexual abuse public issues, as discussed in the previous chapter. They have argued for shared parental responsibility for child care, payment of child support, and redrawing the terms of divorce such that both postdivorce households would have the same standard of living. Above all, feminists have campaigned for good-quality child care subsidized

by government and employers, on-site at big workplaces, and they have organized community child-care facilities and informal networks of parents who share child care. Although some of these efforts have been successful, there is still a great deal to be accomplished if women are not to be penalized for having children, an issue we discuss in Chapter 8.

Although policy makers and politicians often declare that children are the nation's future and greatest resource, parents are given little practical help in caring for them. Susan Moller Okin (1989) notes that so few U.S. politicians have raised children that it seems almost a qualification for political office not to have done so. The editors of *Mothering* magazine pulled no punches when they asked:

Why is the United States the only industrial democracy in the world that provides no universal pre- or postnatal care, no universal health coverage; . . . has no national standards for child care; makes no provision to encourage at-home care in the early years of life; . . . has no explicit family policies such as child allowances and housing subsidies for all families?

(Brennan, Winklepleck, and MacNee 1994, p. 424)

At the same time, former first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton (1996), adopting an African proverb, argued that "it takes a village to raise a child." Most European countries have instituted family policies with provisions for health care, child allowances, child care, prenatal care, parental leave, and services for the elderly. In the United States, family policy is an unfamiliar term and the few policies that support families, like welfare, unemployment assistance, and tax relief, are inadequate and uncoordinated (Albelda and Tilly 1997; Mason, Skolnick, and Sugarman 1998).

Toward a Redefinition of Family Values

The meaning of family and "family values" varies according to one's cultural and political framework. Carol Gill and Larry Voss describe their experience of egalitarian relationships and shared parenting, and the importance of teaching children nonsexist, antiracist, anticlassist attitudes (Reading 43). Ann Filemyr emphasizes the breadth of her chosen family as well as her biological family (Reading 44). As part of an interracial household, she notes also that

she, her partner Essie, and Essie's son walk out of their home into different worlds. Margaret Lamberts Bendroth traces the history behind the "pro-family" position promoted by Protestant fundamentalists at micro, meso, and macro levels (Reading 46). On the basis of the data we cite in this chapter, we argue that elevating the ideal of the nuclear, two-parent family is a major contradiction in contemporary U.S. society. Regardless of its form, we believe that the family should

care for family members, emotionally and materially;

promote egalitarian relationships among the adults, who should not abuse their power over children;

share parenting between men and women so that it is not the province of either gender;

do away with a gendered division of labor; teach children nonsexist, antiracist, anticlassist attitudes and behavior and the values of caring and connectedness to others;

pass on cultural heritage; and influence the wider community.

For personal relationships to be more egalitarian, as far as possible the partners should have

shared values or compatible nonnegotiables, have some compatible sense of why they are together, and share power in the relationship. They also need to be committed to a clear communication process and be willing to work through difficulties with honesty and openness. If the relationship is to last, it must be flexible and able to change over time so that both partners can grow individually as well as together. Few of us have much experience to guide us. Indeed, most people have experienced and observed unequal relationships—at home, in school, and in the wider community.

Susan Moller Okin (1989) argues that for society to be just, all social institutions must be just, including the family. We argue that the family must be a source of security for its members, an element in constructing a secure and sustainable future. A sustainable future means that we, in the present generation, must consider how our actions will affect people of future generations. A useful reference here is the Native American "seventh generation" principle: The community is responsible for those not yet born, and because of this, whatever actions are taken in the present must not jeopardize the possibility of well-being seven generations to come. How would we have to restructure our relationships as well as other social institutions in order to honor that principle?



Questions for Reflection

In reading and discussing this chapter, consider these questions:

1. What do you expect/hope for in an intimate relationship?
2. Are you in love now? How can you tell?
3. How does power manifest itself in your relationships with family members, friends, dates, or lovers?
4. Do you think intimate relationships should be monogamous? Why or why not?
5. Do you have friends or dates with people from a racial/ethnic/cultural group different from your own? If so, how did you meet? How have your differences been a factor in your friendship or relationship?
6. How do you define family? Whom do you consider family in your own life?
7. How do macro-level institutions—in particular the government, media, and organized religion—shape people's relationships and family lives?
8. What is at stake with regard to same-sex marriage? Where do you stand on this issue? Why?

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9. If women are to have more equal treatment within the family, what kinds of changes in male attitudes and behavior will be needed also? How might this happen?
10. What changes are necessary to involve more men in parenting? Look at the micro, meso, macro, and global levels of analysis.



Finding Out More on the Web

1. Visit the following Web sites for more information:
 Indiebride: www.indiebride.com
 Alternatives to Marriage Project: www.unmarried.org
 The Freedom to Marry Coalition of Massachusetts: www.ftmmass.org
 The Religious Coalition for the Freedom to Marry: www.rcfm.org
 Southerners on New Ground: www.southnewground.org
2. Find out more about the Defense of Marriage Act (1996). What assumptions about marriage and the institution of heterosexuality is it based on?
3. Find out about family policies in western European countries (especially Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden). Why do these countries provide better supports for families than the United States?



Taking Action

1. Talk with your peers—women and men—about your nonnegotiables in a personal relationship. What are you willing to compromise on? Why?
2. Talk with your mother or grandmother (or women their age) about their experiences of marriage, motherhood, and family. What choices have they made in their lives in this regard? What options did they have?
3. Look critically at the way women are portrayed in relationships and the family in magazines, ads, movies, and TV shows. What is being promoted through these media?

F O R T Y - O N E



Since When Is Marriage a Path to Liberation? (1989)

Paula Ettelbrick

Lawyer, educator, and civil rights activist Paula L. Ettelbrick is the Executive Director of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. She has written and lectured extensively on the civil and constitutional rights of lesbians and gay men.

"Marriage is a great institution, if you like living in institutions," according to a bit of T-shirt philosophy I saw recently. Certainly, marriage is an institution. It is one of the most venerable, impenetrable institutions in modern society. Marriage provides the ultimate form of acceptance for personal intimate