CHAPTER 2

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Studying Marriages and Families

Outline

What Do YOU Think?

Are the following statements **TRUE** or **FALSE?**
You may be surprised by the answers (see answer key on the following page.)

T   F   **1** To answer questions about families, we need to rely most on our "common sense."

T   F   **2** "Everyone should get married" is an example of an objective statement.

T   F   **3** Many researchers believe that both love and conflict are normal features of families.

T   F   **4** Stereotypes about families, ethnic groups, and gays and lesbians are easy to change.

T   F   **5** We tend to exaggerate how much other people's families are like our own.

T   F   **6** Family researchers formulate generalizations derived from carefully collected data.

T   F   **7** Every method of collecting data on families is limited in some way.

T   F   **8** A belief that our own ethnic group, nation, or culture is innately superior to another is an example of an ethnocentric fallacy.

T   F   **9** According to some scholars, in marital relationships we tend to weigh the costs against the benefits of the relationship.

T   F   **10** It is impossible to observe family behavior.

A word of warning: The subjects covered in this book come up often and unexpectedly in everyday experience. You may be reading the paper or watching television and come upon some news about research on the effects of divorce or day care on children. You might be having lunch with friends or dinner with your parents, and before you know it someone may make claims about what marriages need or lack or how some kinds of families are better or stronger than others. The following hypothetical situation is not an uncommon or unrealistic one.

Imagine having coffee with a close friend. She confides that she is worried about her relationship with her boyfriend of 2 years now that they are separated by nearly 600 miles while at different colleges. You feel for your friend, sensing the seriousness of her anxiety and the depth of her fears. You think hard about her predicament and, wanting to be a supportive friend, smile reassuringly. She shares the following: "I don't know, I guess I sometimes think I'm worrying too much. After all, how many times have I heard, 'absence makes the heart grow fonder'? Everyone knows that. Maybe my relationship will actually get stronger and deeper through this separation." Before you can reply, she continues: "But then I guess I do think too much. Don't they say, 'Out of sight, out of mind.'? Maybe it's just a matter of time before this relationship is history. In fact, I wonder if I should just prepare myself, even start looking for someone new. Now." In obvious distress and confusion, she looks to you for advice: "Hey, you're in a family class. So which is it? Will 'absence make his heart grow fonder' or now that I am 'out of sight' am I soon to be 'out of mind'?"

How would you answer your friend? Both reactions can't be true. Moreover, how can "everyone know" one thing even though "they" say the opposite? Surely, there must be a way to resolve such a contradiction.

In this chapter we examine how family researchers attempt to explore issues such as the one posed here. In that sense, this chapter differs from all of the others. Instead of presenting material about different aspects of the marriage and family experience, it explains and illustrates how we learn the information about relationships and families found in the rest of the book. However, it will enable you to understand better and appreciate more how much our knowledge and understanding of families is enriched by the theories and research procedures we introduce. In learning *how information is obtained and interpreted,* we set the stage for the in-depth exploration of family issues in the chapters that follow.

How Do We Know?

As sociologist Earl Babbie suggests, social research is one way we can learn about things (Babbie 2002). However, most of what we "know" about the social world we have "learned" elsewhere through other less systematic means (Babbie 2002; Neuman 2000). In the previous chapter we noted the dangers inherent in generalizing from personal experiences. We all do this. If you or someone you know had an unfavorable experience with a long-distance relationship, you probably favor the "out of sight, out of mind" response more than the optimistic one your friend is hoping to hear.

The opening scenario illustrates the difficulty involved in relying on what are often called common sense–based explanations or predictions (Neuman 2000). Commonsense understanding of family life may be derived from "tradition," what everyone knows because it has always been that way or been thought to be that way; from "authority figures," whose expertise we trust and whose knowledge we accept; or from various media sources.

The mass media are so pervasive that they become invisible, almost like the air we breathe. Yet they affect us. Popular culture, in all its forms, is a key source of both information and misinformation about families. Cumulatively, television, popular music, the Internet, magazines, newspapers, and movies help shape our attitudes and beliefs about the world in which we live. On average, each of us spends more than 3,400 hours a year using one of these media (U.S. Census Bureau 2001, Table 1125). Television has a particularly powerful effect on our values and beliefs (see the "Popular Culture" box on families in the media). Popular culture conveys images, ideas, beliefs, values, myths,

As of 2002, 98% of U.S. households had television sets. According to Nielsen Media Research, during the 2004–2005 television season (from September to September), the average person watched television four and a half hours per day, the highest level of viewing in 15 years. The average household was tuned in for 8 hours and 11 minutes per day, the highest reported level since Nielsen Media Research began measuring television viewing in the 1950s ("Nielsen Reports Americans Watch TV at Record Levels," http://www.neilsenmedia.com, 2005). Preschool-aged children watched 24 hours of television a week; teens watched between 21 and 22 hours a week. The group with the greatest number of hours of viewing per week was those 55 and older. Men of that age group average 39 hours and 39 minutes a week, and females averaged 44 hours and 11 minutes (Time Almanac 2003).

and stereotypes about every aspect of life and society, including the family.

Because so much of the day-to-day stuff of family life (for example, caring for children, arguing, dividing chores, and engaging in sexual behavior) takes place in private, behind closed doors, we do not have access to what really goes on. But we are privy to those behaviors on television and in movies and magazines. Thus, those depictions can influence what we *assume* happens in real families. If you have seen a movie or television show or read magazine articles in which couples in long-distance relationships thrived despite distance, those sources will likely influence you toward reassuring your nervous friend.

Cumulatively, the multiple forms of commonsense knowledge (experience, tradition, authority, and media) are typically poor sources of accurate and reliable knowledge about social and family life. Often, what we consider and accept as common sense is fraught with the kinds of contradictions depicted previously (or, for example, "birds of a feather flock together" but "opposites attract"). Even in the absence of contradiction, many commonsense beliefs are simply untrue. Thus, if we "really want to know" about how families work or what people in different kinds of family situations or relationships experience, we would be better informed by seeking and acquiring more trustworthy information.

Thinking Critically about Marriage and the Family

Before we examine the specific theories and research techniques used by family researchers, it is important to emphasize that the attitudes of the researcher (or you, as you read research) are important. To obtain valid research information, we need to keep in mind the rules of critical thinking. The term *critical thinking* is another way of saying "clear and unbiased thinking."

We all have perspectives, values, and beliefs regarding marriage, family, and relationships. These can create blinders that keep us from accurately understanding the research information. We need instead to develop a sense of **objectivity** in our approach to

■ *Television sitcoms, such as the popular* Everybody Loves Raymond *or* King of Queens, *influence our beliefs and attitudes about marriage and family. What messages and expectations do these programs convey?*

Popular Culture   Families in the Media

Popular culture in all its forms is a key source of information and misinformation about families. Often, critics point to the pervasive influence of television and its distortions of reality, familial and otherwise. For example, prime-time television, in both dramas and situation comedies, unrealistically depicts married life, understates the unique issues faced by various ethnic families, inaccurately depicts single-parent family life, inaccurately portrays the relative sexual activity levels of marrieds and singles, and portrays conflict as something easily resolved within 20 minutes, often with humor.

The combined portrayal of family life on daytime television that results from soap operas and talk shows is unrealistic and highly negative. Those who have scrutinized daytime soap operas note the extremely high rates of conflict, betrayal, infidelity, and divorce that afflict soap opera families (Pingree and Thompson 1990; Benokraitis and Feagin 1995). Characters go through multiple marriages, often carrying "deep, dark secrets" that they keep from their spouses. Soaps often stereotype women as starry-eyed romantics or scheming manipulators of men. Particularly unrealistic is the way soap operas portray sex, leading viewers to envision exaggerated estimates of how much sex does and should occur within relationships, as well as how often people sexually stray outside of their marriages and relationships (Lindsey 1997). Daytime talk shows, from *Jerry Springer* and *Maury* to *The Montel Williams Show* contribute to the idea that American family life is deeply dysfunctional, that parents are anything from

"irresponsible fools" to "in-your-face monsters" (Hewlett and West 1998), that spouses and partners routinely cheat on each other and often strike each other, and that teenagers are recklessly out of control. Half-naked fisticuffs on *Jerry Springer* and contested allegations and paternity tests on *Maury* are especially distasteful distortions of families and relationships.

As you will see throughout this book, although families are not without their share of serious problems, daily family life is as poorly represented by daytime television as by prime-time programming.

(Un)reality Television

The newest genre of television programming is what has been termed *reality television.* Operating without scripts or professional actors, reality television typically puts "ordinary people" into situations or locations that require them to meet various challenges.

Much of what is considered reality television has nothing to do with relationships, marriages, or families. However, there have been a number of reality programs that focus directly on relationships and family life, including the following current or cancelled shows: *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?, Trading Spouses, Who's Your Daddy?, Supernanny, Brat Camp, Meet Mr. Mom, Boy Meets Boy,* and *Renovate My Family.* Note that these represent just a fraction of the reality genre. Whether these shows match and/or marry people or showcase aspects of families or relationships, they hardly represent what their genre claims as its name. By highlighting extreme cases or introducing artificial circumstances and/or competitive goals, these shows are no more representative of familial reality than the daytime talk shows. It would be dangerous to draw gen-

eralizations from shows such as *Supernanny* or *Brat Camp* and conclude that "kids today" are disrespectful or out of control. Although you may consider yourself too sophisticated to make such a generalization, millions of others watch programs such as these. Are all of them equally sophisticated?

Advice and Information

This media genre transmits information and conveys values and norms—cultural rules and standards—about marriage and family, often disguised as information and intended as entertainment. A veritable industry exists to support the advice and information genre. It produces self-help and childrearing books, advice columns, radio and television shows, and numerous articles in magazines and newspapers.

In newspapers in the past, this genre was represented by such popular "advice columnists" as Abigail Van Buren (real name Pauline Esther Friedman, whose column "Dear Abby" is now written by her daughter), Dan Savage (whose sex-advice column "Savage Love" is syndicated in 70 newspapers), and the late Ann Landers (Abby's twin sister, Esther Pauline Friedman).

Newer, Web-based columnists such as Alison Blackman Dunham and her late twin sister Jessica Blackman Freedman, the self-proclaimed "Advice Sisters," (or "Ann and Abby for the new millennium") helped carry this genre to the Internet. Radio therapists, such as Dr. Joy Browne and Dr. Laura Schlessinger, have daily callers seeking advice or information about relationships, family crises, and so on.

On television, Dr. Philip McGraw's *Dr. Phil* has become a ratings success. McGraw, a psychologist of some 25 years, was featured often on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* before landing

his own talk show in 2002. His shows cover a range of personal and family issues. In a recent 2-week period, for example, episodes included "The Stepford Family," "Is This Normal?" "Wifestyles," "Extreme Parenting," "Nasty Custody Battles," and "Pressured Into Marriage." Dr. Phil is also the author of a number of best-selling books, including *Self Matters: Creating Your Life from the Inside Out,* and *Relationship Rescue: Seven Steps for Reconnecting With Your Partner,* and has a website from which visitors can obtain a variety of suggestions for how to deal with the kinds of relationship and personal issues featured on his show or in his books.

Evaluating the Advice and Information Genre

The various radio or television talk shows, columns, articles, and advice

Courtesy of Everett Collection

■ *Dr. Philip McGraw is a licensed clinical psychologist who in addition to his television program has authored six* New York Times *No. 1 best-selling books.*

© Paramount Television/Courtesy: Everett Collection.

■ *Montel Williams is among a number of television and radio talk show hosts who often focus on family issues, although he approaches them with more seriousness than most others.*

books have several things in common. First, their primary purpose is to sell books or periodicals or to raise program ratings. They must capture the attention of viewers, listeners, or readers. In contrast, the primary purpose of scholarly research is the pursuit of knowledge.

Second, the media must entertain while disseminating information about relationships and families. Thus, the information and advice must be simplified. Complex explanations and analyses must be avoided because they would interfere with the entertainment purpose. Furthermore, the genre relies on high-interest or shocking material to attract readers or viewers. Consequently, we are more likely to read or view stories about finding the perfect mate or protecting our children from strangers than stories about new research methods or the process of gender stereotyping.

Third, the advice and information genre focuses on how-to information or morality. The how-to material advises us on how to improve our relationships, sex lives, childrearing abilities, and so on. Advice and

normative judgments (evaluations based on norms) are often mixed together. Advice columnists act as moral arbiters, much as do ministers, priests, rabbis, and other religious leaders.

Fourth, the genre uses the trappings of social science without its substance. Writers and columnists interview social scientists and therapists to give an aura of scientific authority to their material. They rely especially heavily on therapists with clinical rather than academic backgrounds. Because clinicians tend to deal with people with problems, they often see relationships as problematical.

To reinforce their authority, the media also incorporate statistics, which are key features of social science research. But Susan Faludi (1991) offers this word of caution:

The statistics that the popular culture chooses to promote most heavily are the very statistics we should view with the most caution. They may well be in wide circulation not because they are true but because they support widely held media preconceptions.

With the media awash in advice and information about relationships, marriage, and family, how can we evaluate what is presented to us? Here are some guidelines:

■ *Be skeptical.* Remember: Much of what you read or see is meant to entertain you. Are the sources scholarly or popular? Do they rely on self described "experts" or "victims"? How representative are the people interviewed?

■ *Search for biases, stereotypes, and lack of objectivity.* Information is often distorted by points of view. What conflicting information may have been omitted? Does the media's idea of family include diverse family forms and experiences?

Continues

Popular Culture   Families in the Media—cont'd

- *Look for moralizing.* Many times what passes as fact is disguised moral judgment. What are the underlying values of the article or program?

- *Go to the original source or sources.* The media simplify. Find out for yourself what the studies said. How valid were their methodologies? What were their strengths and limitations?

- *Seek additional information.* The whole story is probably not told. In looking for additional information, consider information in scholarly books and journals, reference books, or college textbooks.

    Throughout this book you will be exposed to a variety of information or data about families. This information may or may not reflect your experiences, but its value is this: It will enable you to learn about how other people experience family life. This knowledge and the results of different kinds of responses to family situations enable a more informed understanding of families in general and of yourself as an individual. Finally, such information is important and necessary for a variety of professionals and practitioners, especially those who provide social services, medical care, or legal assistance, as they deal with family-related issues.

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information—to suspend the beliefs, biases, or prejudices we have about a subject until we understand what is being said (Kitson et al. 1996). We can then take that information and relate it to the information and attitudes we already have. Out of this process a new and enlarged perspective may emerge.

One area in which we may need to be alert to maintaining an objective approach is that of family lifestyle. The values we have about what makes a successful family can cause us to decide ahead of time that certain family lifestyles are "abnormal" because they differ from our experience or preference. We may refer to single-parent families as "broken" or say that adoptive parents are "not the real parents."

A clue that can sometimes help us "hear" ourselves and detect whether we are making value judgments or objective statements is as follows: A **value judgment** usually includes words that mean "should" and imply that our way is the correct way. An example is, "Everyone should get married." This text presents information based on scientifically measured findings—for example, concluding that "about 90% of Americans marry."

Opinions, biases, and stereotypes are ways of thinking that lack objectivity. An **opinion** is based on our experiences or ways of thinking. A **bias** is a strong opinion that may create barriers to hearing anything contrary to our opinion. A **stereotype** is a set of simplistic, rigidly held, and overgeneralized beliefs about the personal characteristics of a group of people. They form the "glasses" with which we "see" people and groups. Stereotypes are fairly resistant to change. Furthermore, stereotypes are often negative. Common stereotypes related to marriages and families include the following:

- Nuclear families are best.
- Stepfamilies are unhappy.
- Lesbians and gay men cannot be good parents.
- Latino families are poor.
- Women are instinctively nurturing.
- People who divorce are selfish.

We all have opinions and biases; most of us, to varying degrees, think stereotypically. But the commitment to objectivity requires us to become aware of these opinions, biases, and stereotypes and to put them aside in the pursuit of knowledge.

Fallacies are errors in reasoning. These mistakes come as the result of errors in our basic presuppositions. The *gambler's fallacy,* for example, is based on the belief that following a stretch of bad luck at cards or dice the next hand or roll has to be better. Or, having been "hot," the gambler should quit because luck has or will soon "run out." However, every roll of two dice or hand of cards dealt is independent of whatever came before. Statistically, there is no truth to the gambler's fallacy.

Two common types of fallacies that especially affect our understanding of families are egocentric fallacies and ethnocentric fallacies. The **egocentric fallacy** is the mistaken belief that everyone has the same experiences and values that we have and therefore should

think as we do. The **ethnocentric fallacy** is the belief that our ethnic group, nation, or culture is innately superior to others. In the next chapter, when we consider the differences and strengths of families from different ethnic and economic backgrounds, you need to keep both of these fallacies from distorting your understanding.

From the day of your birth you have been forming impressions about human relationships and developing ways of behaving based on these impressions. Hence, you might feel a sense of "been there, done that" as you read about an aspect of personal development or family life. However, your study of the information in this book will provide you the opportunity to reconsider your present attitudes and past experiences and relate them to the experiences of others. As you do, this you will be able to use the logic and problem-solving skills of critical thinking so that you can effectively apply that which is relevant to your life.

Theories and Research Methods

Family researchers come from a variety of academic disciplines—from sociology, psychology, and social work to communication and family studies (sometimes known as "family and consumer sciences").

Although these disciplines may differ in terms of the specific questions they ask or the objectives of their research, they are unified in their pursuit of accurate and reliable information about families through the use of social scientific theories and research techniques. Scholarly research about the family brings together information and formulates generalizations about certain areas of experience. These generalizations help us predict what happens when certain conditions or actions occur.

Family science researchers use the **scientific method**—well-established procedures used to collect information about family experiences. With scientifically accepted techniques, they analyze this information in a way that allows other people to know the source of the information and to be confident of the accuracy of the findings. Much of the research family scientists do is shared in specialized journals (for example, *Journal of Marriage and the Family, Journal of Family Issues*) or in book form. By communicating their results through such channels, other researchers can build on, refine, or further test research findings. Much of the information contained in this book originally appeared in scholarly journals.
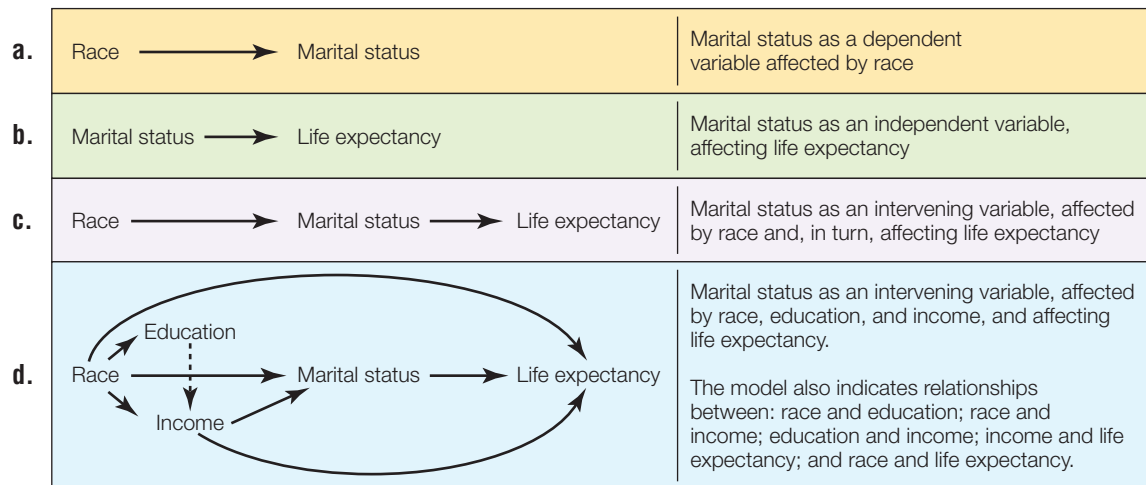
Theories of Marriage and Families

One of the most important differences between the knowledge about marriage and family derived from family research and that acquired elsewhere is that family research is influenced or guided by **theories**—sets of general principles or concepts used to explain a phenomenon and to make predictions that may be tested and verified experimentally. Although researchers collect and use a variety of kinds of data on marriages and families, these data alone do not automatically convey the meaning or importance of the information gathered. Concepts and theories supply the "story line" for the information we collect.

Concepts are abstract ideas that we use to represent the reality in which we are interested. We use concepts to focus our research and organize our data. Many examples of concepts—for example, nuclear families, monogamy, and socialization—were introduced in the previous chapter. Family research involves the processes of **conceptualization,** the specification and definition of concepts used by the researcher, and of **operationalization,** the identification and/or development of research strategies to observe or measure concepts. For example, to study the relationship between social class and childrearing strategies, we need to define and specify how we are going to identify and measure a person's social class position and childrearing strategies.

In **deductive research,** concepts are turned into **variables,** concepts that can vary in some meaningful way. Marital status is an example of a variable used by family researchers. We may be married, divorced, widowed, or never married. As researchers explore the causes and/or consequences of marital status, they may formulate **hypotheses,** or predictions, about the relationships between marital status and other variables. We might hypothesize that race or social class influences whether someone is married or not. In such an example, race is an **independent variable** and marital status the **dependent variable** in that race is thought to influence the likelihood of becoming or staying married. Marital status, on the other

Figure 2.1 ■ **Marital Status as a Dependent, Independent, and Intervening Variable**

a. Race ⟶ Marital status	Marital status as a dependent variable affected by race
b. Marital status ⟶ Life expectancy	Marital status as an independent variable, affecting life expectancy
c. Race ⟶ Marital status ⟶ Life expectancy	Marital status as an intervening variable, affected by race and, in turn, affecting life expectancy
d. Education / Income / Race ⟶ Marital status ⟶ Life expectancy	Marital status as an intervening variable, affected by race, education, and income, and affecting life expectancy. The model also indicates relationships between: race and education; race and income; education and income; income and life expectancy; and race and life expectancy.

hand, may be a causal or independent variable in a hypothesized relationship between being married and life expectancy. Finally, marital status might be hypothesized as an **intervening variable,** affected by the independent variable, race, and in turn affecting the dependent variable, life expectancy. In that instance, the hypothesis suggests that race differences in marital status account for race differences in life expectancy (Figure 2.1).

Rarely do researchers construct theories with only two or three variables. They may hypothesize multiple independent and intervening variables and seek to identify those having the greatest effect on the dependent variable (Neuman 2000). In Figure 2.1, panel d is an illustration of this. Race is hypothesized to have direct and indirect effects on marital status. Race is alleged to have effects on both income and education, which—in turn—are hypothesized to affect marital status. And, finally, race, income, and marital status are all hypothesized to have effects on life expectancy.

Inductive research is not hypothesis testing research. Instead, it begins with a topical interest and perhaps some vague concepts. As researchers gather their data, typically in the form of field observations or interviews, they refine their concepts, seek to identify recurring patterns out of which they can make generalizations, and, perhaps, end by building a theory (or asserting some hypotheses) based on the data collected. Theory that emerges in this inductive fashion is often referred to as **grounded theory,** in that it is

grounded or "rooted in observations of specific, concrete details" (Neuman 2000).

Theoretical Perspectives on Families

On a more abstract level of theory, we can identify major theoretical frameworks or perspectives that guide much of the research about families. These perspectives (sometimes called *paradigms*) are sets of concepts and assumptions about how families work and how they fit into society. Theoretical frameworks guide the kinds of questions we raise, the types of predictions we make, and where we look to find answers or construct explanations (Babbie 1992).

In this section we discuss several of the most influential theories sociologists and psychologists use to study families, including: ecological, symbolic interaction, social exchange, developmental, structural functional, conflict, and family systems theory. We also look at the influence of feminist perspectives on family studies. As you examine them, notice how the choice of a theoretical perspective influences the way data are interpreted. Furthermore, as you read this book, ask yourself how different theoretical perspectives would lead to different conclusions about the same material.

Family Ecology Theory

The emphasis of **family ecology theory** is on how families are influenced by and in turn influence the wider environment. The theory was introduced in the late nineteenth century by plant and human ecologists. German biologist Ernst Haeckel first used the term *ecology* (from the German word *oekologie,* or "place of residence") and placed conceptual emphasis on **environmental influences.** This focus was soon picked up by Ellen Swallows Richards, the founder and first president of the American Home Economics Association (now known as the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences). An MIT-trained chemist, Richards believed that scientists needed to focus on home and family, "for upon the welfare of the home depends the welfare of the commonwealth" (quoted in White and Klein 2002).

The core concepts in ecological theory include **environment** and **adaptation.** Initially used to refer to the adaptation of plant and animal species to their physical environments, these concepts were later extended to humans and their physical, social, cultural, and economic environments (White and Klein 2002). As applied to family issues, the family ecology perspective asks: How is family life affected by the environments in which families live?

We use the plural *environments* to reflect the multiple environments that families encounter. In Urie Brofenbrenner's ecologically based theory of human development, the environment to which individuals adapt as they develop consists of four levels: (1) microsystem, (2) mesosystem, (3) exosystem, and (4) **macrosystem.** Cumulatively, these levels make up the environments in which we live. The *microsystem* contains the most immediate influences with which individuals have frequent contact. For example, in adolescence our microsystem could include our families, peers, schools, and neighborhoods. In each of these, roles and relationships exert influence over how we develop. The *mesosystem* consists of the interconnections between microsystems—for example, the ways school experiences and home experiences influence each other. The *exosystem* consists of settings in which the individual does not actively participate but which nonetheless affect his or her development. Parental work experiences—everything from salaries to schedules to continued employment—will influence adolescent development. Finally, the *macrosystem* operates at the broadest level, encompassing the laws, customs,

attitudes, and belief systems of the wider society, all of which influence individual development and experience (Rice and Dolgin 2002).

Similarly, in constructing an ecological framework to better understand marriage relationships, Ted Huston illustrated how marital and intimate unions are "embedded in a social context" (Huston 2000). This social context includes the *macroenvironment*—the wider society, culture, and physical environment in which a couple lives—and their particular *ecological niche*—the behavior settings in which they function on a daily basis (for example, a poor, urban neighborhood as opposed to a small town or suburb). Also included in the social context is the marriage relationship itself, especially as it is affected by a larger network of relationships. The final key element in Huston's ecological approach contains the physical, psychological, and social attributes of each spouse, including attitudes and beliefs about their relationship and each other. As illustrated in Figure 2.2, each of these environments influences and is influenced by the others (Huston 2000). We cannot fully understand marriage without exploring the interconnections among these three elements.

In a study of work–family stresses and problem drinking, Joseph Grzywacz and Nadine Marks (2000) applied an ecological approach, wherein problem drinking is seen as a consequence of "negative person–environment interactions," including, especially, high levels of work or family stress or issues arising from the mesosystem of work and family. Ecological factors, then, operate "above and beyond" individual factors in accounting for problem drinking. Negative "spillover" from work to home includes such things as job-induced irritability and fatigue inhibiting home involvement, and job worries that lead to distraction at home. All of these were factors that elevated the likelihood of problem drinking. Furthermore, positive person–environment interactions, such as positive work–family spillover, were associated with reduced likelihood of problem drinking.

As evident, ecological approaches examine how family experience is affected by the broader social environment. In many ways, much of what we examine in subsequent chapters has at least this level of ecological focus. We cannot understand what happens within families without considering the wider cultural, social, and economic environments within which family life takes place.

Issues and Insights Conceptualizing in a Disaster

For many of us, even years later, images are still vividly with us and recalled anytime we hear the date 9/11. We can remember where we were on that date in 2001 when we first heard the news, or saw the footage, of the planes flying into the World Trade Center, into the Pentagon, and into the ground in Pennsylvania. The twin towers of the World Trade Center, which took 6 years and 8 months to build, collapsed less than 2 hours after being struck by the hijacked planes (St. Petersburg Times, September 8, 2002). More than 1.6 million tons of debris and nearly 20,000 body parts were removed from the site. But the memories of planes striking buildings, of the two massive towers collapsing to the ground, and of the smoke and debris and chaos on the streets of New York City are not easily removed.

Neither are the images and memories of the more recent tragedy in the Gulf Coast states of Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, and Florida from Hurricane Katrina, an eventual Category 5 hurricane that hit land nearly 2 weeks shy of the fourth anniversary of the destruction of the World Trade Center. With winds that occasionally reached 170 miles an hour Katrina devastated the region. Hardest hit was New Orleans, where 80% of the city was submerged under water, but Biloxi and Gulfport, Mississippi, and parts of Mobile, Alabama suffered similarly. More than 1.7 million people lost power, damage estimates exceed $100 billion, and the future of the region, particularly New Orleans, faces challenges (National Climatic Data Center, http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/oa/climate/research/2005/katrina.html, December 29, 2005).

The human cost of both tragedies was enormous. More than 1,300 people, in five states, died from Hurricane Katrina. More than twice as many died in the September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center.

■ *Disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 often throw families into extreme situations of ambiguous loss.*

Clearly, both events also brought great suffering to families. Parents, spouses, children and siblings—as well as extended family and friends—suffered sudden and unanticipated loss. Thousands of families were forced to cope and grieve. Husbands and wives became widowers and widows, children faced life without mothers or fathers. Parents faced the terrible reality of losing children. Brothers and sisters were left without their sisters and brothers. In addition, many thousands of families, for at least a time, were left in limbo, without news about the whereabouts of missing loved ones. Did they survive? Where were they? How could they be reunited? It is hard to imagine how such uncertainty weighs on the families of the missing. More than 4 years after 9/11, all but two dozen "missing" were accounted for. Five months after Hurricane Katrina, more than 3,000 of the nearly 11,500 people reported missing were still missing (Associated Press, January 19, 2006). What must families feel in such situations? Extraordinary as these events are, can we make any sense of the familial aftermath?

Pauline Boss, has spent more than 30 years studying families dealing with either physically missing or psychologically missing members. Beginning in the early 1970s by looking at *psychological father absence,* wherein fathers were present but distant, Boss broadened her interest to include situations in which any family member might be said to be "there, but not there." She labeled such circumstances *ambiguous loss* (Boss 2004). Ultimately, she defined **ambiguous loss** as "a situation of unclear loss resulting from not knowing whether a loved one is dead or alive, absent or present" (Boss 2004, 554). Such loss, she suggests, is the

most stressful because it remains unresolved and creates lasting confusion "about who is in or out of a particular family" (p. 553). There is no death certificate, no funeral, no opportunity to honor the deceased or bury remains. It prevents family members from reaching psychological closure, and it leaves families in a situation of boundary ambiguity—unable to carry out expected roles, manage daily tasks, or make necessary decisions. As a result, families are immobilized, roles are confused, and tasks remain undone.

Boss considers two situations of ambiguous loss. First is the ambiguous loss of "there, but not there," of "physical presence and psychological absence" mentioned previously and applicable in unexpected situations such as when a family member suffers from dementia (including Alzheimer's disease), depression, or addictions, and in more common situations, such as preoccupation with work; obsessive involvement with the Internet, or divorce followed by re-marriage. In the second form of ambiguous loss, members remain psychologically present despite physical absence. This "not there (physically), but there (psychologically)" version of ambiguous loss can be found in tragic situations of war (for families of soldiers missing in action), among families of incarcerated inmates, in families where a member deserts, and in such events as occurred on 9/11 or in the Gulf states, especially if no body is recovered. Even more common versions of "not there but there" can occur after divorce or adoption, work relocations, and children leaving home and the "nest" emptying. We can face both types of ambiguous loss simultaneously, as Boss describes in the case of a woman who, after 9/11, had a

physically missing husband while caring for her psychologically missing mother, who was suffering from Alzheimer's disease (Boss 2004).

Not all situations of ambiguous loss result in the same outcomes or suffering. Some families manage to redraw otherwise ambiguous boundaries (such as when an aunt or uncle steps in and is viewed as a parent). As Boss notes, "longtime partners of missing workers perceived themselves as wives and then widows, challenging the officials in charge of remunerations" (555). It appears as if some people have higher tolerance for ambiguity and therefore may be more resilient in instances such as Hurricane Katrina or the World Trade Center aftermath.

Individuals may suffer many emotional or psychological wounds after a tragedy such as 9/11 or Katrina. Indeed, surviving family members may also suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). But ambiguous loss is not the same as PTSD. PTSD treatment focuses on individuals, not families as whole systems. Also, PTSD is a pathology, a psychological illness. Ambiguous loss is a situation of stress that can lead to individual suffering but needs to be understood *on the familial level* (Boss 2004).

More than 8,000 of those reported missing in the Gulf Coast after Katrina have been found or their bodies have been identified. Still, 3,200 or more families struggle to find closure and come to terms with what the storm took from them. Using concepts such as *ambiguous loss* enables us to better understand what they suffer from and why. Such understanding won't alter their suffering or reduce the pain of their losses, but it may make it possible to be more effective in any efforts to help them move on.

Figure 2.2 ■ **A Three-Level Model for Viewing Marriage**

The various contexts and environments in which families live influence each other. Macroenvironment (A): spouses' ecological niche (a1) and macrosocietal context (a2). Individuals (B): spouses' beliefs and attitudes, (b1) spouses' psychological and physical makeup, and (b2) marital behavior in context. (C) Marital dyad: (c1) social network context (c2).
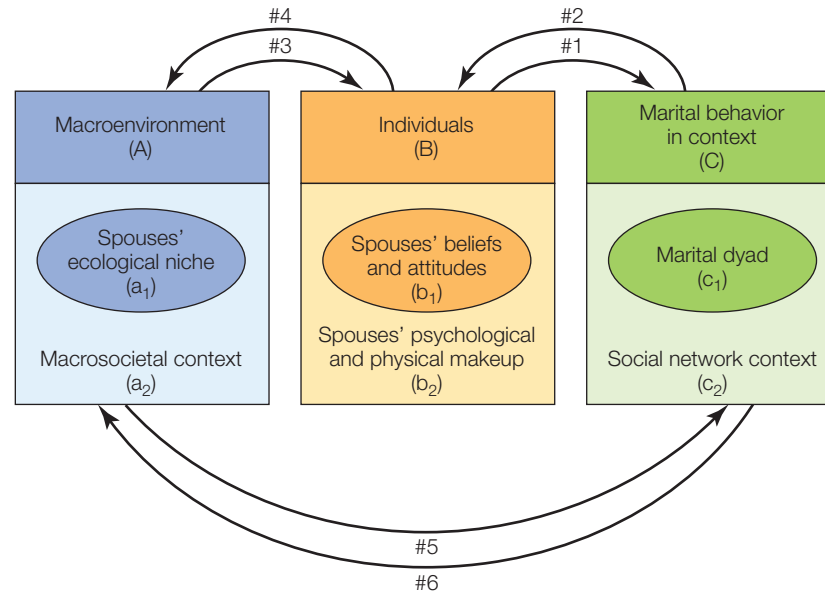
SOURCE: Huston 2000.

There have been a variety of criticisms of ecological theory (White and Klein 2002). Here we note two. It is often unclear which level of analysis is most appropriate—individual, group, or population—to account for the behavior we attempt to explain. In addition, there is a lack of specificity as to the process through which families are affected and what specifically is responsible for the outcomes we seek to explain. Also, some criticize the perspective for seeming to apply more easily to development and growth rather than decline or degeneration. Yet families are prone to decline and degeneration as much as they are to development and growth.

Symbolic Interaction Theory

Symbolic interaction theory looks at how people interact with one another. An **interaction** is a reciprocal act, the everyday words and actions that take place between people. For an interaction to occur, there must be at least two people who both act and respond to each other. When you ask your sister to pass the potatoes and she does it, an interaction takes place. Even if she intentionally ignores you or tells you to "get the potatoes yourself," an interaction occurs (even if it is not a positive one). Such interactions are conducted through symbols, words, or gestures that stand for something else.

Interaction consists of more than merely reacting to others. To interact, we interpret or define the meaning of their words, gestures and actions. If your sister did not respond to your request for the potatoes, what did her nonresponse mean or symbolize? Hostility? Rudeness? A hearing problem? We interpret the meaning and act accordingly. If we interpret the nonresponse as not hearing, we may repeat the request. If we believe it symbolizes hostility, or rudeness, we may become angry.

Symbolic interactionists, like the rest of us, are concerned with relationships. When we feel that our partner does (or does not) understand us, that we communicate well (or poorly), that our relationship can (or cannot) withstand the difficulties created by long distance, we are expressing feelings at the heart of symbolic interaction research. Symbolic interactionists study the interactions that make up a relationship.

Family as the Unity of Interacting Personalities

In the 1920s, Ernest Burgess defined the family as a "unity of interacting personalities" (1926). This definition has been central to symbolic interaction theory and in the development of marriage and family studies. Marriages and families consist of individuals who interact with one another over time. Such interactions and relationships define the nature of a family: a loving family, a dysfunctional family, a conflict-ridden family, an emotionally distant family, a high-achieving family, and so on.

In marital and family relationships, our interactions are partly structured by **social roles**—established patterns of behavior that exist independently of a person, such as the role of wife or husband existing independently of any particular husband or wife. Each member in a marriage or family has one or more roles, such as husband, wife, mother, father, child, or sibling. These roles help give us cues as to how we are supposed to act. When we marry, for example, these roles help us "become" wives and husbands; when we have children, they help us "become" mothers and fathers.

Symbolic interactionists study how the sense of self is maintained in the process of acquiring these roles. We are, after all, more than simply the roles we fulfill. There is a core self independent of our being a husband or wife, father or mother, son or daughter. Symbolic interactionists ask how we fulfill our roles and continue to be ourselves and, at the same time, how our roles contribute to our sense of self. Our identities as humans emerge from the interplay between our unique selves and our social roles.

Only in the most rudimentary sense are families created by society. According to symbolic interactionists, families are "created" by their members. Each family has its own unique personality and dynamics created by its members' interactions. To classify families by structure, such as nuclear family, stepfamily, and single-parent family, misses the point of families. Structures are significant only insofar as they affect family dynamics. It is what goes on inside families, the construction, communication, and interpretation of shared meanings that is important.

This is nicely illustrated in a widely acclaimed book, *The Second Shift,* by sociologist Arlie Hochschild. Hochschild interviewed 50 dual-earner couples to see how they divided housework and childcare. She noted that only 20% of her sample couples shared housework responsibilities equally. In 70% of her sample couples, men did between one-third and one-half of the housework, and in the remaining 10% of sample households, men did less than one-third of the household tasks.

But Hochschild went further and deeper. She examined what happened in households where what couples did (their actual behavior) conflicted with what each partner believed they should do (their "gender ideologies"). She described the strategic use of **family myths,** views of reality that together couples construct and apply to account for why their domestic arrangement is other than they expected (Hochschild 1989).

The clearest example of the workings of such myths can be found among a couple Hochschild calls Evan and Nancy Holt. After repeated but unsuccessful efforts on Nancy's part to convince husband Evan to share more of the housework, Nancy considered the possibility of a divorce. Unwilling to end her marriage "over a dirty frying pan," she and Evan arrived at a "solution," which Hochschild calls the "upstairs–downstairs" myth. Under this version of domestic reality, Nancy notes that she does the "upstairs" and Evan has taken responsibility for, and freed her from, the "downstairs." Hochschild points out that although portrayed by the Holts as "sharing," this solution leaves much unequal. The "upstairs" included the living room, dining room, kitchen, two bedrooms, and two bathrooms; whereas the "downstairs" amounted to the garage, which included responsibility for the car and the dog. Nevertheless, by constructing and believing in the idea that they "share," Nancy was able to live with their arrangement. Thus, the meanings Nancy attached to their arrangement ("I do the upstairs, he does the downstairs; we share"), what we might consider her "definition of her marital situation" became more important than their actual division of responsibilities.

Family myths were used in the opposite direction in Hochschild's sample as well. In other words, couples who believed that traditional divisions of labor (male breadwinner, female homemaker) were best but who could not financially afford such an arrangement often constructed myths that explained away their failure to achieve them. In one such case, Carmen Delacorte was considered an at-home wife even though she brought in one-third of the household income by providing childcare in her home.

Critique

Although symbolic interaction theory focuses on the daily workings of the family, it suffers from several drawbacks. First, the theory tends to minimize the role

of power in relationships. If a conflict exists, it may reveal more than differences in meaning and it may take more than simply communicating to resolve it. If one partner strongly wants to pursue a career in Los Angeles and the other just as strongly wants to pursue a career in Boston, no amount of communication and role adjustment may be sufficient to resolve the conflict. The partner with the greater power in the relationship may prevail.

Second, symbolic interaction does not fully account for the psychological aspects of human life, especially personality and temperament. It sees us more in terms of our roles, thus neglecting the self that exists independently of our roles and limiting our uniqueness as humans.

Perhaps most important, the theory does not place marriage or family within a larger social context. It thereby disregards or minimizes the forces working on families from the outside, such as economic or legal discrimination against minorities and women.

Social Exchange Theory

According to **social exchange theory,** we measure our actions and relationships on a cost–benefit basis, seeking to maximize rewards and minimize costs by employing our resources to gain the most favorable outcome. An outcome is basically figured by the equation *Reward − Cost = Outcome.*

How Exchange Works

At first glance, exchange theory may be the least attractive theory we use to study marriage and the family. It seems more appropriate for accountants than for lovers. But all of us use a cost–benefit analysis to some degree to measure our actions and relationships.

One reason many of us do not recognize our use of this interpersonal accounting is that we do much of it unconsciously. If a friend is unhappy with a partner, you may ask, "What are you getting out of this relationship? Is it worth it?" Your friend will start listing pluses and minuses: "On the plus side, I get company and a certain amount of security; on the minus side, I don't get someone who really understands me." When the emotional costs outweigh the benefits of the relationship, your friend will probably end it. This weighing of costs and benefits is social exchange theory at work.

One problem many of us have in recognizing our exchange activities is that we think of rewards and costs as tangible objects, like money. In personal relationships, however, resources, rewards, and costs are more likely to be things such as love, companionship, status, power, fear, and loneliness. As people enter into relationships, they have certain resources—either tangible or intangible—that others consider valuable, such as intelligence, warmth, good looks, or high social status. People consciously or unconsciously use their various resources to obtain what they want, as when they

■ *How family members interact with one another is partly determined by how they define their roles and by the meanings they attach to such behaviors as housework and childcare.*

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"turn on" the charm. Most of us have had friends, for example, whose relationships are a mystery to us. We may not understand what our friend sees in his or her partner; our friend is so much better looking and more intelligent than the partner. (Attractiveness and intelligence are typical resources in our society.) But it turns out that the partner has a good sense of humor, is considerate, and is an accomplished musician, all of which our friend values highly.

Equity

A corollary to exchange is **equity:** exchanges that occur between people have to be fair, to be balanced. We are always exchanging favors: you do the dishes tonight and I'll take care of the kids. Often we do not even articulate these exchanges; we have a general sense that they will be reciprocated. If, in the end, we feel that the exchange was not fair, we are likely to be resentful and angry. Some researchers suggest that people are most happy when they get what they feel they deserve in a relationship (Hatfield and Walster 1981). Oddly, both partners feel uneasy in an inequitable relationship:

> While it is not surprising that deprived partners (who are, after all, getting less than they deserve) should feel resentful and angry about their inequitable treatment, it is perhaps not so obvious why their overbenefited mates (who are getting more than they deserve) feel uneasy, too. But they do. They feel guilty and fearful of losing their favored position.

> When partners recognize that they are in an inequitable relationship, they generally feel uncomfortable, angry, or distressed. They try to restore equity in one of three ways:

- They attempt to restore actual equity in the relationship.
- They attempt to restore psychological equity by trying to convince themselves and others that an obviously inequitable relationship is actually equitable.
- They decide to end the relationship.

> Society regards marriage as a permanent commitment. Because marriages are expected to endure, exchanges take on a long-term character. Instead of being calculated on a day-to-day basis, outcomes are judged over time.

An important ingredient in these exchanges is whether the relationship is fundamentally cooperative or competitive. In cooperative exchanges, both husbands and wives try to maximize their "joint profit" (Scanzoni 1979). These exchanges are characterized by mutual trust and commitment. Thus, a husband might choose to work part-time and care for the couple's infant so that his wife may pursue her education. In a competitive relationship, however, each is trying to maximize individual profit. If both spouses want the freedom to go out whenever or with whomever they wish, despite opposition from the other, the relationship is likely to be unstable.

Applying Exchange Theory to Marital Outcomes

Exchange theory has been applied to a number of areas of marriage and family including mate selection or partner choice, transition to parenthood, and decisions to divorce. Looking more closely at the latter, the theory suggests the following:

- *Attractiveness of relationship.* A relationship's attractiveness depends on its relative rewards and costs. A relationship's rewards include love, support, security, and sexual intimacy, as well as material goods and services that marriage allows us to obtain or enjoy. Costs associated with marriage may include being and staying in a relationship that causes us emotional or physical suffering, increased and unequal responsibility, lack of freedom, or absence of rewards (Knoester and Booth 2000). A marriage in which we obtain more rewards than costs likely will be attractive and satisfying.

- *Attractiveness of alternatives.* Exchange theory suggests that we are always comparing our relationship outcomes to what we perceive as the sum of rewards and costs in available alternatives. In these terms, alternatives can be a new partner—whether in marriage or something more casual, greater freedom as a single person, or even the chance to focus on a career instead of remaining married. The logic of the theory suggests that if we perceive greater rewards in some alternative or alternatives, we will think about and/or seek a divorce.

- *Barriers to divorce.* Chris Knoester and Alan Booth (2000) note that the final piece in this exchange theory approach to divorce is the presence or absence of barriers to divorce. In some ways, barriers to divorce may be understood as costs associated with leaving the marriage. Even if the rewards of marriage are low and less than could be found outside of the marriage, we may have barriers to overcome if we are to leave

our relationships. If the costs of leaving are greater than the rewards of leaving and/or the costs of staying, exchange theory would predict that we would stay, even unhappily, married (Knoester and Booth 2000; Levinger 1976).

Knoester and Booth (2000) tested the importance of eight perceived barriers to divorce: financial security, not wanting to leave the residence, the spouse's dependency on the respondent, the respondent's dependency on the spouse, importance of religious beliefs, concern about the children suffering, concern about losing (custody or contact with) a child, and disapproval of family or friends.

For each barrier, respondents were asked, "How important is (blank) in keeping your marriage together?" Possible responses ranged from "very important" to "somewhat important" to "not very important."

In order from highest to lowest, the most important barriers and the percentage of respondents who identified them as "very important" are as follows:

Barrier	"Very Important" (%)
Child suffering	50.1
No loss of child	46.0
Religious beliefs	41.4
Dependence on spouse	32.9
Spouse's dependence	30.5
Financial security	24.1
Reluctance to leave residence	18.7
Family and friends	11.6

Knoester and Booth note differences in men's and women's answers. Men were more likely than women to attach greater importance to the threat of losing a child and the influence of family and friends. Women placed greater importance on dependence on spouse and religious beliefs. Also, although financial security was considered "very important" by only one-fourth of the sample, another 50% considered it "somewhat important" (not shown), meaning that it is at least a consideration to 75% of the sample.

Knoester and Booth (2000) determine that perceived barriers are mostly ineffective as deterrents to divorce, despite the logic behind believing them to be so. They suggest that such barriers may have once been more important factors in the divorce process but that in an era in which so many marriages end in divorce, the idea of barriers to divorce keeping people married is no longer useful.

Critique

Social exchange theory assumes that we are all rational, calculating individuals, weighing the costs and rewards of our relationships and making cost–benefit comparisons of all alternatives. In reality, sometimes we are rational and sometimes we are not. Sometimes we act altruistically without expecting any reward. This is often true of love relationships and parent–child interactions.

Social exchange theory also has difficulty ascertaining the value of costs, rewards, and resources. If you want to buy eggs, you know they are a certain price per dozen and you can compare buying a dozen eggs with spending the same amount on a notebook. But how does the value of an outgoing personality compare with the value of a compassionate personality? Is 1 pound of compassion equal to 10 pounds of enthusiasm? Compassion may be the trait most valued by one person but may not be important to another. The values that we assign to costs, rewards, and resources may be highly individualistic.

Family Development Theory

Of all the theories discussed here, **family development theory** is the only one exclusively directed at families (White and Klein 2002). It emphasizes the patterned changes that occur in families through stages and across time. In its earliest formulations, family development theory borrowed from theories of individual development and identified a set number of stages that all families pass through as they are formed: growth with the birth of children, change during the raising of children, and contract as children leave and spouses die. Such stages created the *family life cycle.* Eventually, other concepts were introduced to replace the idea of a family life cycle. Roy Rodgers (1973) and Joan Aldous (1978, 1996) proposed the notion of the *family career,* which was said to consist of subcareers like the marital or the parental career, which themselves were affected by an educational or occupational career. Most recently, the idea of the *family life course* has been used to examine the dynamic nature of family experience.

The family life course consists of "all the events and periods of time (stages) between events traversed by a family" (White and Klein 2002). Because all of these concepts emphasize the change and development of families over time, they are complementary and overlapping.

Family development theory looks at the changes in the family that typically commence in the formation of the premarital relationship, proceed through marriage, and continue through subsequent sequential stages. The specification of stages may be based on family economics, family size, or developmental tasks that families encounter as they move from one stage to the next. The stages are identified by the primary or orienting event characterizing a period of the family history. An eight-stage family life cycle might consist of the following: (1) beginning family, (2) childbearing family, (3) family with preschool children, (4) family with schoolchildren, (5) family with adolescents, (6) family as launching center, (7) family in middle years, and (8) aging family.

As we grow, each of us responds to certain universal developmental challenges (Person 1993). For example, all people encounter normative age-graded influences, such as the biological processes of puberty and menopause or sociocultural markers such as the beginning of school and the advent of retirement. Normative history-graded influences come from historical facts that are common to a particular generation, such as the political and economic influences of wars and economic depressions that are similar for individuals in a particular age group (Santrock 1995).

The life-cycle model gives us insights into the complexities of family life and the different tasks that families perform. This model describes the interacting influences of changing roles and circumstances through time and how such changes produce corresponding changes in family responsibilities and needs. Planning that uses the developmental model alerts the family to seek resources appropriate to the upcoming needs and to be aware of vulnerabilities associated with each family stage (Higgins, Duxbury, and Lee 1994).

There are a variety of developmental theories that examine the stages involved in specific family phenomena such as "falling in love," choosing a spouse, or experiencing divorce. Instead of attempting to depict all stages families might encounter, these theories look at the unfolding of specific aspects of family life across stages. You will find such approaches in a number of later chapters.

Critique

An important criticism sometimes made of family development theory is that it assumes the sequential processes of intact, nuclear families. It further assumes that all families go through the same process of change across the same stages. Thus, the theory downplays both the diversity of family experience and the experiences of those who divorce, remain childless, or bear children but never marry (Winton 1995). For example, lesbian-headed families are likely to experience a life-cycle pattern quite different from the traditional one (Slater 1995). Similarly, stepfamilies experience different stages and tasks (Ahrons and Rogers 1987). Nevertheless, the universality of the family life cycle may transcend the individuality of the family form. Single-parent and two-parent families go through many of the same development tasks and transitions. They may differ, however, in the timing and length of those transitions.

A related criticism points out that gender, race, ethnicity, and social class all create variations in how we experience family dynamics. The very sequence of stages may reflect a middle- to upper-class family reality. Many lower- and working-class families do not have lengthy periods of early childless marriage. The transitions to marriage and parenthood may be encountered simultaneously or in reverse of what the stages specify. In neglecting these sorts of variations, the developmental model can appear overly simplistic.

Structural Functionalism Theory

Structural functionalism theory explains how society works, how families work, and how families relate to the larger society and to their own members. The theory is used largely in sociology and anthropology, disciplines that focus on the study of society rather than of individuals. When structural functionalists study the family, they look at three aspects: (1) what functions the family serves for society (discussed in Chapter 1), (2) what functional requirements family members perform for the family, and (3) what needs the family meets for its individual members.

Society as a System

Structural functionalism is deeply influenced by biology. It treats society as if it were a living organism, like a person, animal, or tree. The theory sometimes uses the analogy of a tree in describing society. In a tree, there are many substructures or parts, such as the trunk, branches, roots, and leaves. Each structure has a function. The roots gather nutrients and water from

the soil, the leaves absorb sunlight, and so on. Society is like a tree insofar as it has different structures that perform functions for its survival. These structures are called **subsystems.**

The subsystems are the major institutions, such as the family, religion, government, and the economy. Each of these structures has a function in maintaining society, just as the different parts of a tree serve a function in maintaining the tree. Religion gives spiritual support, government ensures order, and the economy produces goods. The family provides new members for society through procreation and socializes its members so that they fit into society. In theory, all institutions work in harmony for the good of society and one another.

The Family as a System

Families may also be regarded as systems. In looking at families, structural functionalists examine how the family organizes itself for survival and what functions the family performs for its members. For the family to survive, its members must perform certain functions, which are traditionally divided along gender lines. Men and women have different tasks: Men work outside the home to provide an income, whereas women perform household tasks and childrearing.

According to structural functionalists, the family molds the kind of personalities it needs to carry out its functions. It encourages different personality traits for men and women to ensure its survival. Men develop instrumental traits, and women develop expressive traits. *Instrumental traits* encourage competitiveness, coolness, self-confidence, and rationality—qualities that will help a person succeed in the outside world. *Expressive traits* encourage warmth, emotionality, nurturing, and sensitivity—qualities appropriate for someone caring for a family and a home.

Such a division of labor and differentiation of temperaments is seen as efficient because it allows each spouse to specialize, thus minimizing competition and reducing ambiguity or uncertainty over such things as who should work outside the home or whose outside employment is more important. For these reasons, such role allocation may be deemed functional.

Critique

Although structural functionalism has been an important theoretical approach to the family, it has declined in significance in recent decades for several reasons. First, because the theory cannot be empirically tested, we'll never know if it is "right" or "wrong." We can only discuss it theoretically, arguing whether it accounts for what we know about the family.

Second, it is not always clear what function a particular structure serves. "The function of the nose is to hold the *pince-nez* [eyeglasses] on the face," remarked the eighteenth-century philosopher François Voltaire. What is the function of the traditional division of labor along gender lines? Efficiency, survival, or the subordination of women?

If interdependence, specialization, and clarity of role responsibilities are what make breadwinner–homemaker households most "functional," those same objectives could be met by household arrangements wherein men stay home, rear kids, and tend house and women earn incomes. In some relationships these role reversals might be more functional. There are women who earn higher incomes than their husbands, are in jobs with greater opportunities for advancement, and are more dedicated to their careers than are their husbands. If their husbands are frustrated by or stagnated at work but have developed or discovered a deeper-than-anticipated fulfillment from children, a reversal of the male provider–female homemaker household would be most functional for them.

Third, how do we know which family functions are vital? The family, for example, is supposed to socialize children, but much socialization has been taken over by the schools, peer groups, and the media. Is this "functional"?

Fourth, structural functionalism has a conservative bias against change. Aspects that reflect stability are called functional, and those that encourage instability (or change) are called dysfunctional. Traditional roles are functional, but nontraditional ones are dysfunctional. Employed mothers are viewed as undermining family stability because they should be home caring for the children, cleaning house, and providing emotional support for their husbands. But in reality, employed mothers may be contributing to family stability by earning money; their income often pushes their families above the poverty line.

Finally, structural functionalism looks at the family abstractly. It looks at it formally, from a distance far removed from the daily lives and struggles of men, women, and children. It views the family in terms of functions and roles. Family interactions, the lifeblood of family life, are absent. Because of its formalism, structural functionalism often has little relevance to real families in the real world.

Conflict Theory

Where structural functionalists assert that existing structures benefit society, conflict theorists ask, "Who benefits?" **Conflict theory** holds that life involves discord. Conflict theorists see society not as basically cooperative but as divided, with individuals and groups in conflict with one another. They try to identify the competing forces.

Sources of Conflict

How can we analyze marriages and families in terms of conflict and power? Such relationships are based on love and affection, aren't they? Conflict theorists agree that love and affection are important elements in marriages and families, but they believe that conflict and power are also fundamental. Marriages and families are composed of individuals with different personalities, ideas, values, tastes, and goals. Each person is not always in harmony with every other person in the family.

Imagine that you are living at home and want to do something your parents don't want you to do, such as spend the weekend with a friend they don't like. They forbid you to carry out your plan. "As long as you live in this house, you'll have to do what we say." You argue with them, but in the end you stay home. Why did your parents win the disagreement? They did so because they had greater power, according to conflict theorists.

Conflict theorists do not believe that conflict is bad; instead, they think it is a natural part of family life. Families always have disagreements, from small ones, such as what movie to see, to major ones, such as how to rear children. Families differ in the number of underlying conflicts of interest, the degree of underlying hostility, and the nature and extent of the expression of conflict. Conflict can take the form of competing goals, such as a husband wanting to buy a new CD player and a wife wanting to pay off credit cards. Conflict can also occur because of different role expectations: An employed mother may want to divide housework 50–50, whereas her husband insists that household chores are "women's work."

Sources of Power

When conflict occurs, who wins? Family members have different resources and amounts of power. There are four important sources of power: legitimacy, money, physical coercion, and love. When arguments arise in a family, a man may want his way "because I'm the head of the house" or a parent may argue "because I'm your mother." These appeals are based on legitimacy—that is, the belief that the person is entitled to prevail by right. Money is a powerful resource in marriages and families. "As long as you live in this house. . ." is a directive based on the power of the purse. Because men tend to earn more than women, they have greater economic power; this economic power translates into marital power. Physical coercion is another important source of power. "If you don't do as I tell you, you'll get a spanking" is one of the most common forms of coercion of children. But physical abuse of a spouse is also common, as we will see in a later chapter. Finally, there is the power of love. Love can be used to coerce someone emotionally, as in "If you really loved me, you'd do what I ask." Or love can be a freely given gift, as in the case of a person giving up something important, such as a plan, desire, or career, to enhance a relationship.

Everyone in the family has power, although the power may be different and unequal. Adolescent children, for example, have few economic resources, so they must depend on their parents. This dependency gives the parents power. But adolescents also have power through the exercise of personal charm, ingratiating habits, temper tantrums, wheedling, and so on.

Families cannot live comfortably with much open conflict. The problem for families, as for any group, is how to encourage cooperation yet allow for differences. Because conflict theory sees conflict as normal, the theory seeks to channel it and to seek solutions through communication, bargaining, and negotiations. We return to these items in Chapter 5 in the discussion of conflict resolution.

Critique

A number of difficulties arise in conflict theory. First, conflict theory derives from politics, in which self-interest, egotism, and competition are dominant elements. Yet is such a harsh judgment of human nature justified? People's behavior is also characterized by self-sacrifice and cooperation.

Love is an important quality in relationships. Conflict theorists do not often talk about the power of love or bonding; yet the presence of love and bonding may distinguish the family from all other groups in society. We often will make sacrifices for the sake of those we love. We will defer our wishes to another's desires;

■ *According to conflict theory, conflict is a normal and natural feature of family life. Families often have disputes over such things as the division of responsibilities, allocation of resources, and levels of commitment.*

we may even sacrifice our lives for a loved one. Second, conflict theorists assume that differences lead to conflict. Differences can also be accepted, tolerated, or appreciated. Differences do not necessarily imply conflict. Third, conflict in families is not easily measured or evaluated. Families live much of their lives privately, and outsiders are not always aware of whatever conflict exists or how pervasive it is. Also, much overt conflict is avoided because it is regulated through family and societal rules. Most children obey their parents, and most spouses, although they may argue heatedly, do not employ violence.

Family Systems Theory

Family systems theory combines two of the previous sociological theories, structural functionalism and symbolic interaction, to form a psychotherapeutic theory. Mark Kassop (1987) notes that family systems

theory creates a bridge between sociology and family therapy.

Structure and Patterns of Interaction

Like functionalist theory, family systems theory views the family as a structure of related parts or subsystems. Each part carries out certain functions. These parts include the spousal subsystem, the parent–child subsystem, the parental subsystem (husband and wife relating to each other as parents), and the personal subsystem (the individual and his or her relationships). One of the important tasks of these subsystems is maintaining their boundaries. For the family to function well, the subsystems must be kept separate (Minuchin 1981). Husbands and wives, for example, should prevent their conflicts from spilling over into the parent–child subsystem. Sometimes a parent will turn to the child for the affection that he or she ordinarily receives from a spouse. When the boundaries of the separate subsystems blur, as in incest, the family becomes dysfunctional.

As in symbolic interaction, interaction is important in systems theory. A family system consists of more than simply its members. It also consists of the pattern of interactions of family members: their communication, roles, beliefs, and rules. Marriage is more than a husband and wife; it is also their pattern of interactions. The structure of marriage is determined by how the spouses act in relation to each other over time (Lederer and Jackson 1968). Each partner influences, and in turn is influenced by, the other partner. And each interaction is determined in part by the previous interactions. This emphasis on the pattern of interactions within the family is a distinctive feature of the systems approach.

Virginia Satir (1988) compared the family system to a hanging mobile. In a mobile, all the pieces, regardless of size and shape, can be grouped together and balanced by changing the relative distance between the parts. The family members, like the parts of a mobile, require certain distances between one another to maintain their balance. Any change in the family mobile—such as a child leaving the family, family members forming new alliances, and hostility distancing the mother from the father—affects the stability of the mobile. This disequilibrium often manifests itself in emotional turmoil and stress. The family may try to restore the old equilibrium by forcing its "errant" member to return to his or her former position, or it may

adapt and create a new equilibrium with its members in changed relations to one another.

Analyzing Family Dynamics

In looking at the family as a system, researchers and therapists believe the following:

- *Interactions must be studied in the context of the family system.* Each action affects every other person in the family. The family exerts a powerful influence on our behaviors and feelings, just as we influence the behaviors and feelings of other family members. On the simplest level, an angry outburst by a family member can put everyone in a bad mood. If the anger is constant, it will have long-term effects on each member of the family, who will cope with it by avoidance, hostility, depression, and so on.

- *The family has a structure that can only be seen in its interactions.* Each family has certain preferred patterns of acting that ordinarily work in response to day-to-day demands. These patterns become strongly ingrained "habits" of interactions that make change difficult. A warring couple, for example, may decide to change their ways and resolve their conflicts peacefully. They may succeed for a while, but soon they fall back into their old ways. Lasting change requires more than changing a single behavior; it requires changing a pattern of relating.

- *The family is a purposeful system; it has a goal.* In most instances, the family's goal is to remain intact as a family. It seeks **homeostasis,** or stability. This goal of homeostasis makes change difficult, for change threatens the old patterns and habits to which the family has become accustomed.

- *Despite resistance to change, each family system is transformed over time.* A well-functioning family constantly changes and adapts to maintain itself in response to its members and the environment. The family changes through the family life cycle—for example, as partners age and as children are born, grow older, and leave home. The parent must allow the parent–child relationship to change. A parent must adapt to an adolescent's increasing independence by relinquishing some parental control. The family system adapts to stresses to maintain family continuity while making restructuring possible. If the primary wage earner loses his or her job, the family tries to adapt to the loss in income; the children may seek work, recreation may be cut, or the family may be forced to move.

Although it has been applied to a variety of family dynamics, systems theory has been particularly influential in studying *family communication* (White and Klein 2002). As applied by systems theorists, interaction and communication between spouses are the kinds of systems wherein a husband's (next) action or communication toward his wife depends on her prior message to him. But through research in family communications, we recognize that marital communication is more complex than a simple *quid pro quo* or reciprocity expectation, such as "if she is nasty, he is nasty." John Gottman has explored marital communication patterns that differentiate distressed from nondistressed couples. He identifies the importance of nonverbal communication over that of verbal messages spouses send (White and Klein 2002). As shown in later chapters, certain nonverbal messages are especially useful predictors of the eventual success or failure of a relationship (Gottman et al. 1998; Gottman and Levenson 1992).

Critique

It is difficult for researchers to agree on exactly what family systems theory is. Many of the basic concepts are still in dispute, even among the theory's adherents, and the theory is sometimes accused of being so abstract that it loses any real meaning (Melito 1985; White and Klein 2002).

Family systems theory originated in clinical settings in which psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, and therapists tried to explain the dynamics of dysfunctional families. Although its use has spread beyond clinicians, its greatest success is still in the analysis and treatment of dysfunctional families. As with clinical research, however, the basic question is whether its insights apply to healthy families, as well as to dysfunctional ones. Do healthy families, for example, seek homeostasis as their goal, or do they seek individual and family well-being?

Feminist Perspectives

As a result of the feminist movement of the past two decades, new questions and ways of thinking about the meaning and characteristics of families have arisen. Although there is not a unified "feminist family theory," **feminist perspectives** share a central concern regarding family life.

Blending some central ideas of conflict theory with those of interactionist theory, feminists critically examine the ways in which family experience is shaped by **gender**—the social aspects of being female or male. This is the orienting focus that unifies most feminist writing, research, and advocacy. Feminists maintain that family and gender roles have been constructed by society and do not derive from biological or absolute conditions. They believe that family and gender roles have been created by men to maintain power over women. Basically, the goals of the feminist perspective are to work to accomplish changes and conditions in society that remove barriers to opportunity and oppressive conditions and are "good for women" (Thompson and Walker 1995).

Gender and Family: Concepts Created by Society

Who or what constitutes a family cannot be taken for granted. The "traditional family" is no longer the predominant family lifestyle. Today's families have great diversity. What we think family should be is influenced by our own values and family experiences. Research demonstrates that couples actually may construct gender roles in the ongoing interactions that make up their marriages (Zvonkovic et al. 1996).

Are there any basic biological or social conditions that require the existence of a particular form of family? Some feminists would emphatically say no. Some object to efforts to study the family because to do so accepts as "natural" the inequalities built into the traditional concept of family life. Feminists urge an extended view of family to include all kinds of sexually interdependent adult relationships regardless of the legal, residential, or parental status of the partnership. For example, families may be formed of committed relationships between lesbian or gay individuals, with children obtained through adoption, from previous marriages, or through artificial insemination.

Feminist Agenda

Feminists strive to raise society's level of awareness regarding the oppression of women. Furthermore, some feminists make the point that all groups defined on the basis of age, class, race, ethnicity, disability, or sexual orientation are oppressed; they extend their concern for greater sensitivity to all disadvantaged groups (Allen and Baber 1992). Feminists assume that the experiences of individuals are influenced by the social system in which they live. Therefore, the experiences

of each individual must be analyzed to form the basis for political action and social change. The feminist agenda is to attend to the social context as it affects personal experience and to work to translate personal experience into community action and social critique.

Feminists believe that it is imperative to challenge and change the system that exploits and devalues women. They are aware of the dangers of speaking out but feel their integrity will be threatened if they fail to do so. Some feminists have described themselves as having "double vision"—the ability to be successful in the existing social system and simultaneously work to change oppressive practices and institutions.

Men as Gendered Beings

Inspired and influenced by the writing and research of feminist scholars, many social scientists now focus on how men's experiences are shaped by cultural ideas about masculinity and by their efforts to either live up to or challenge those ideas (Kimmel and Messner 1998; Cohen 2001). Instead of assuming that gender only matters to or includes women, this perspective looks at men as men, or as "gendered beings," whose experiences are shaped by the same kinds of forces that shape women's lives (Kimmel and Messner 1998).

With increased attention on gender courtesy of feminist scholars, and a more recent refocusing of attention to men as "gendered beings," we now have a greatly enlarged and still growing body of literature about men as husbands, fathers, sexual partners, ex-spouses, abusers, and so on (for example, see Cohen 1987; Coltrane 1996; Daly 1993; Gerson 1993; LaRossa 1988; Marsiglio 1998; and Johnson 1996). Throughout this book, we explore how gender shapes women's and men's experiences of the family issues we examine.

Critique

The feminist perspective is not a unified theory; rather, it represents thinking across the feminist movement. It includes a variety of viewpoints that have, however, an integrating focus relating to the inequity of power between men and women in society and especially in family life (MacDermid et al. 1992).

Some family scholars who conceptualize family life and work as a "calling" have taken issue with feminists' focus on power and economics as a description of family. This has created a moral dialogue concerning the place of family life and work in "the good society" (Ahlander and Bahr 1995; Sanchez 1996). Feminists

■ *Surveys are often used to look at how daily housework, such as cooking, is divided between marriage partners.*

today recognize considerable diversity within their ranks, and the ideas of feminist theorists and other family theorists often overlap.

Applying Theories to Long-Distance Relationships

Although the preceding theories were illustrated with numerous examples, it is worthwhile to return to the opening scenario and look at some of the questions each of the theories might pose about long-distance relationships, given their major assumptions. These examples, illustrated in Table 2.1, are not intended to exhaust all possible questions suggested by each theory, nor do they necessarily favor *either* "absence makes the heart grow fonder" or "out of sight, out of mind." They are meant merely as examples of how each theory's core ideas might apply to long-distance relationships.

Conducting Research on Families

In gathering their data, researchers use a variety of techniques. Some researchers ask the same set of questions of great numbers of people. They collect information from people of different ages, sexes, living

situations, and ethnic backgrounds. This is known as "representative sampling." In this way researchers can discover whether age or other background characteristics influence people's responses. This approach to research is called **quantitative research** because it deals with large quantities of information that is analyzed and presented statistically. Quantitative family research often uses sophisticated statistical techniques to assess the relationships between variables. Survey research and, to a lesser extent, experimental research (discussed in the following sections) are examples of quantitative research.

Other researchers study smaller groups or sometimes individuals in a more in-depth fashion. They may place observers in family situations, conduct intensive interviews, do case studies involving information provided by several people, or analyze letters, diaries, or other records of people whose experiences represent special aspects of family life. This form of research is known as **qualitative research** because it is concerned with a detailed understanding of the object of study. The sections on observational research illustrates qualitative research (Ambert, Adler, and Detzner 1995).

In addition to using information provided specifically by people participating in a research project, researchers use information from public sources. This research is called **secondary data analysis.** It involves reanalyzing data originally collected for another purpose. Examples might include analyzing U.S. Census data and official statistics, such as state marriage, birth, and divorce records. Secondary data analysis also

Table 2.1 ■ Applying Theories to Long-Distance Relationships

Theory	Assumptions about Families	Applied to Long-Distance Relationships
Ecological	Families are influenced by and must adapt to environments.	How do the characteristics of each partner's different living environments affect their abilities to maintain their commitments to the relationship? How does the physical separation place the partners in somewhat different ecological niches, which in turn may be more or less conducive to maintaining the relationship? How does the cultural exosystem impose certain beliefs or expectations that might influence the stability of these relationships?
Symbolic Interaction	Family life acquires meaning for family members and depends on the meanings they attach.	What meaning do couples attach to being separated? How does this alter their perceptions of the relationship? Does separation prevent or inhibit the construction of a shared definition of the relationship?
Social Exchange	Individuals seek to maximize rewards, minimize costs, and achieve equitable relationships.	How do both partners define the costs and rewards associated with their relationship? If the rewards of continuing the relationship are felt to be greater than the costs associated with their physical separation, they will maintain their relationship. If either perceives the costs of being apart as too great, or finds another more rewarding relationship, the long-distance relationship will end.
Family Development	Families undergo predictable changes over time and across stages.	How do couples handle the transition to a long-distance relationship? What are the stages or phases that couples encounter as they adjust to being separated? What are the key tasks that must be accomplished at each stage for the relationship to survive?
Structural Functionalism	The institution of the family contributes to the maintenance of society. On a familial level, roles and relationships within the family contribute to its continued well-being.	How does physical separation function to maintain or threaten the stability of the relationship? What benefits does separation have for the individual partners and for the couple's relationship?
Conflict	Family life is shaped by social inequality. Within families, as within all groups, members compete for scarce resources (for example, attention, time, power, and space).	To what extent does one partner benefit more from being apart? Assuming that one partner has a greater commitment to the relationship, how does physical separation create inequality between partners? How does separation prevent couples from effectively managing and resolving conflict?
Family Systems	Families are systems that function and must be understood on that level.	How does being physically separated make it difficult for the couple to communicate effectively? What difficulties does separation create for maintaining the equilibrium of the relationship? How are boundaries between the family system and the wider society altered by being separated?
Feminist	Gender affects our experiences of and within families. Gender inequality shapes how women and men experience families. Families perpetuate gender difference.	How are women and men differently affected by separation? Do long-distance heterosexual relationships create a gender-unequal relationship? Does separation lead men to exploit women by expecting women—but not men—to remain faithful or monogamous? Do women bear more of the burden of managing and maintaining the relationship?

includes content analysis of various communication media such as newspapers, magazines, letters, and television programs.

Family science researchers conduct their investigations using **ethical guidelines** agreed on by professional researchers. These guidelines protect the privacy and safety of people who provide information in the research. For example, any research conducted with college students requires the investigator to present the plan and method of the research to a "human sub-jects review committee." This ensures that subjects' participation is voluntary and that their privacy is protected. To protect the privacy of participants, researchers promise them either anonymity or confidentiality. **Anonymity** insists that no one, including the researcher, can connect particular responses to the individuals who provided them. Much questionnaire research is of this kind, providing that no identifying information is found on the questionnaires. According to the rules of **confidentiality,** the researcher knows

the identities of participants and can connect what was said to who said it but promises not to reveal such information publicly.

To protect the safety of research participants, researchers design their studies with the intent to minimize any possible and controllable harm that might come from participation. Such harm is not typically physical harm but rather embarrassment or discomfort. Much of what family researchers study is ordinarily kept private. Talking about personal matters with an interviewer or answering a series of survey questions may create unintended anxiety on the part of the participants. At best, researchers carefully design their studies to reduce the extent and likelihood of such reactions. Unfortunately, they cannot always be completely prevented (Babbie 2002).

Research ethics also require researchers to conduct their studies and report their findings in ways that assure readers of the accuracy, originality, and trustworthiness of their reports. Falsifying data, misrepresenting patterns of findings, and plagiarizing the research of others are all unethical.

What researchers know about marriage and the family comes from four basic research methods: survey research, clinical research, observational research, and experimental research. There is a continual debate as to which method is best for studying marriage and the family. But such arguments may miss an important point: each method may provide important and unique information that another method may not (Cowan and Cowan 1990).

Survey Research

The **survey research** method, using questionnaires or interviews, is the most popular data-gathering technique in marriage and family studies. Surveys may be conducted in person, over the telephone, or by written questionnaires. Typically, the purpose of survey research is to gather information from a smaller, representative group of people and to infer conclusions valid for a larger population. Questionnaires offer anonymity, may be completed fairly quickly, and are relatively inexpensive to administer.

Quantitative questionnaire research is an invaluable resource for gathering data that can be generalized to the wider population. Because researchers who use such techniques typically draw or use *probability-based random samples,* they can estimate the likelihood that their sample data can be safely inferred to the pop-

ulation in which they are interested. Furthermore, preestablished response categories or existing scales or indexes used by all respondents allow more comparability across a particular sample and between the sample data and related research.

For example, Chloë Bird's 1997 study examined the psychological distress associated with the burdens of parenting, as they vary by gender. Using data from 1,601 men and women under age 60 who participated in the U.S. Survey of Work, Family, and Well-Being, she contrasted the levels of distress experienced by parents with those of nonparents, and—among parents—compared mothers with fathers.

Although the details of her analysis are too complex to be dealt with here, she determined that, on average, parents report higher levels of distress than do people without children, and mothers report higher levels of distress than do fathers (Bird 1997). Women with children under age 18 living at home reported experiencing the highest levels of distress. From her carefully controlled analysis, Bird determined that it is not children but rather increased social and economic burdens that accompany children that seem to create the psychological outcomes she identified.

Questionnaires usually do not allow in-depth responses, however; a person must respond with a short answer, a *yes* or *no,* or a choice on a scale of, for example, 1 to 10, from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree,* from *very important* to *unimportant,* and so on. Unfortunately, marriage and family issues are often too complicated for questionnaires to explore in depth.

Interview techniques avoid some of this shortcoming of questionnaires because interviewers are able to probe in greater depth and follow paths suggested by the interviewee. They are also typically better able to capture the particular meanings or the depth of feeling people attach to their family experiences.

Consider these two examples, each of which conveys reactions to the life changes associated with becoming or being parents. The first comes from Sharon Hays's interview study of 38 mothers of 2- to 4-year-old children (1996).

In describing how priorities are restructured when a woman becomes a mother, one of Hays's informants offered this comment:

> I think the reason people are given children is to realize how selfish you have been your whole life— you are just totally centered on yourself and what you want. And suddenly here's this helpless thing that needs you constantly. And I kind of think that's

why you're given children, so you kinda think, okay, so my youth was spent for myself. Now, you're an adult, they come first. . . . Whatever they need, they come first.

The second example comes from research conducted by one of the authors on men's experiences becoming and being fathers (Cohen 1993). Here, a 33-year-old municipal administrator describes how becoming a father changed his life:

> I think everything in a personal relationship a baby changes. . . . It's just fantastic . . . it knocked me for a loop. Something creeps into your life and then all of a sudden it dominates your life. It changes your relationship to everybody and everything, and you question every value you ever had. . . . And you say to yourself, "This is a miracle."

These examples of narrative data convey much about the experience of parenthood, including a depth of feeling and degree of nuance that quantitative questionnaire data cannot. By having respondents circle or check the appropriate preestablished response categories to a researcher's questions, we may never identify what that response means to the respondent or how it fits within the wider context of her or his life. However, interviewers are less able to determine how commonly such experiences or attitudes are found. Interviewers may also occasionally allow their own preconceptions to influence the ways in which they frame their questions and to bias their interpretation of responses.

There are problems associated with survey research, whether done by questionnaires or interviews. First, how representative is the sample (the chosen group) that volunteered to take the survey? In the case of a probability-based sample this is not a concern. Self-selection (volunteering to participate) also tends to bias a sample. Second, how well do people understand their own behavior? Third, are people underreporting undesirable or unacceptable behavior? They may be reluctant to admit that they have extramarital affairs or that they are alcoholics, for example. If for any reason people are unable or unwilling to answer questions honestly, the survey technique will produce misleading or inaccurate data.

Nevertheless, surveys are well suited for determining the incidence of certain behaviors or for discovering traits and trends. Much of the research that family scientists conduct and use—on topics as far reaching as the division of housework and childcare,

the frequency of and satisfaction with sex, or the effect of divorce on children or adults—is derived from interview or questionnaire data. Surveys are more commonly used by sociologists than by psychologists, because they tend to deal on a general or societal level rather than on a personal or small-group level. But surveys are not able to measure well how people interact with one another or what they actually do. For researchers and therapists interested in studying the dynamic flow of relationships, surveys are not as useful as clinical, experimental, and observational studies.

Secondary Analysis

As mentioned earlier, many researchers use a technique known as secondary data analysis. Because of the various costs associated with conducting surveys on large, nationally representative samples, researchers often turn to one of the available survey data sets such as the General Social Survey (GSS) conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. The GSS includes many social science variables of interest to family researchers. Family researchers also often use data issued by the U.S. Census Bureau, which include many descriptive details about the U.S. population, including characteristics of families and households.

Additional examples of available survey data of particular value to family researchers include the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) and the National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLS). The NSFH has provided much information about a range of family behaviors including the division of housework, the frequency of sexual activity, and the relationships between parents and their adult children. The NHSLS is based on a representative sample of 3,432 Americans, aged 18 to 59, and contains much useful data about sexual behavior (Christopher and Sprecher 2000).

The major difficulty associated with secondary data analysis is that the material collected in the original survey may "come close to" but not be exactly what you wanted to examine. Perhaps you would have worded it differently to capture the essence of what you are interested in. Likewise, perhaps you would have asked additional questions to further or more deeply explore your topical interest (Babbie 2002). This disadvantage, although real, does not negate the benefits associated with secondary analysis.

Clinical Research

Clinical research involves in-depth examination of a person or a small group of people who come to a psychiatrist, psychologist, or social worker with psychological or relationship problems. The **case-study method,** consisting of a series of individual interviews, is the most traditional approach of all clinical research; with few exceptions, it was the sole method of clinical investigation through the first half of the twentieth century (Runyan 1982).

Clinical researchers gather a variety of additional kinds of data, including direct, first-hand observation or analysis of records. Rather than a specific technique of data collection, clinical research is distinguished by its examination of individuals and families that have sought some kind of professional help. The advantage of clinical approaches is that they offer long-term, in-depth study of various aspects of marriage and family life. The primary disadvantage is that we cannot necessarily make inferences about the general population from them. People who enter psychotherapy are not a representative sample. They may be more motivated to solve their problems or have more intense problems than the general population (Kitson et al. 1996).

One of the more widely cited and celebrated clinical studies is Judith Wallerstein's longitudinal study of 60 families who sought help from her divorce clinic. Wallerstein has published three books, *Surviving the Breakup: How Children and Parents Cope With Divorce; Second Chances: Men, Women, and Children a Decade After Divorce;* and *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: The 25 Year Landmark Study,* following the experiences of most of the children in these families (she has retained 93 of the original 131 children that she first interviewed in 1971) at 5, 10, and 25 years after divorce (Wallerstein 1980, 1989, 2000). All three books are sensitively written and richly convey the multitude of short- and long-term effects of divorce in the lives of her sample. Her critics have questioned whether findings based on such a clinically drawn sample (60 families from Marin County, California, who sought help as they underwent divorce) apply to divorced families more generally (Coontz 1998).

Clinical studies, however, have been fruitful in developing insight into family processes. Such studies have been instrumental in the development of family systems theory, discussed earlier in this chapter. By analyzing individuals and families in therapy, psychia-trists, psychologists, and therapists such as R. D. Laing, Salvador Minuchin, and Virginia Satir have been able to understand how families create roles, patterns, and rules that family members follow without being aware of them.

Observational Research

Observational research and experimental studies (discussed in the next section) account for less than 5% of recent research articles (Nye 1988). In **observational research,** scholars attempt to study behavior systematically through direct observation while remaining as unobtrusive as possible. To measure power in a relationship, for example, an observer researcher may sit in a home and videotape exchanges between a husband and a wife. The obvious disadvantage of this method is that the couple may hide unacceptable ways of dealing with decisions, such as threats of violence, when the observer is present. Individuals within families, as well as families as groups, are concerned with appearances and the impressions they make.

Another problem with observational studies is that a low correlation often exists between what observers see and what the people observed report about themselves (Bray 1995). Researchers have suggested that self-reports and observations measure two different views of the same thing: A self-report is an insider's view, whereas an observer's report is an outsider's view (Jacob et al. 1994). Some observational research involves family members being given structured activities to carry out. These activities involve interaction that can be observed between family members (Milner and Murphy 1995). They may include problem-solving tasks, putting together puzzles or games, or responding to a contrived family dilemma. Different tasks are intended to elicit different types of family interaction, which provide the researchers with opportunities to observe behaviors of interest.

A third problem that observational researchers encounter involves the essentially private nature of most family relationships and experiences. Because we experience most of our family life "behind closed doors," researchers typically cannot see what goes on "inside," without being granted access. For more public family behavior, observational data can be effectively used.

For example, an observational study by sociologist Paul Amato examined the question, "Who takes care

Understanding Yourself

What Do Surveys Tell You about Yourself?

Survey questionnaires are the leading source of information about marriage and the family. The questionnaire that follows was developed by Don Martin to gain information about attitudes toward marriage and the family. On a scale of 1 to 5 as shown, indicate your response for each statement.

The Marriage and Family Life Attitude Survey	Strongly agree (1)	slightly agree (2)	neither agree nor disagree (3)	slightly disagree (4)	strongly disagree (5)
I. Cohabitation and Premarital Sexual Relations					
1. I have or would engage in sexual intercourse before marriage.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I believe it is acceptable to experience sexual intercourse without loving one's partner.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I want to live with someone before I marry him or her.	1	2	3	4	5
4. If I lived intimately with a member of the opposite sex, I would tell my parents.	1	2	3	4	5
II. Marriage and Divorce					
5. I believe marriage is a lifelong commitment.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I believe divorce is acceptable except when children are involved.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I view my parents' marriage as happy.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I believe I have the necessary skills to make a good marriage.	1	2	3	4	5
III. Childhood and Childrearing					
9. I view my childhood as a happy experience.	1	2	3	4	5
10. If both my spouse and I work, I would leave my child in a day care center while at work.	1	2	3	4	5
11. If I have a child, I feel only one parent should work so that the other can take care of the child.	1	2	3	4	5
12. The responsibility for raising a child is divided between both spouses.	1	2	3	4	5
13. I believe I have the knowledge necessary to raise a child properly.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I believe children are not necessary in a marriage.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I believe two or more children are desirable for a married couple.	1	2	3	4	5
IV. Division of Household Labor and Professional Employment					
16. I believe household chores and tasks should be equally shared between marital partners.	1	2	3	4	5
17. I believe there are household chores that are specifically suited for men and others for women.	1	2	3	4	5
18. I believe women are entitled to careers equal to those of men.	1	2	3	4	5
19. If my spouse is offered a job in a different locality, I will move with my spouse.	1	2	3	4	5
V. Marital and Extramarital Sexual Relations					
20. I believe sexual relations are an important component of a marriage.	1	2	3	4	5
21. I believe the male should be the one to initiate sexual advances in a marriage.	1	2	3	4	5
22. I do not believe extramarital sex is wrong for me.	1	2	3	4	5

After you have completed this questionnaire, ask yourself the following questions:

- Were the questions correctly posed so that your responses adequately portrayed your attitudes?
- Were questions omitted that are important for you regarding marriage and the family? If so, what were they?
- Do your attitudes reflect your actual behavior?

The Marriage and Family Life Attitude Survey	Strongly agree (1)	slightly agree (2)	neither agree nor disagree (3)	slightly disagree (4)	strongly disagree (5)
VI. Privacy Rights and Social Needs					
23. I believe friendships outside of marriage with the opposite sex are important in a marriage.	1	2	3	4	5
24. I believe the major social functioning in a marriage should be with other couples.	1	2	3	4	5
25. I believe married couples should not argue in front of other people.	1	2	3	4	5
26. I want to marry someone who has the same social needs as I have.	1	2	3	4	5
VII. Religious Needs					
27. I believe religious practices are important in a marriage.	1	2	3	4	5
28. I believe children should be made to attend church.	1	2	3	4	5
29. I would not marry a person of a different religious background.	1	2	3	4	5
VIII. Communication Expectations					
30. When I have a disagreement in an intimate relationship, I talk to the other person about it.	1	2	3	4	5
31. I have trouble expressing what I feel toward the other person in an intimate relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
32. When I argue with a person in an intimate relationship, I withdraw from that person.	1	2	3	4	5
33. I would like to learn better ways to express myself in a relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
IX. Parental Relationships					
34. I would not marry if I did not get along with the other person's parents.	1	2	3	4	5
35. If I do not like my spouse's parents, I should not be obligated to visit them.	1	2	3	4	5
36. I believe each spouse's parents should be seen an equal amount of time.	1	2	3	4	5
37. I feel parents should not intervene in any matters pertaining to my marriage.	1	2	3	4	5
38. If my parents did not like my choice of a marriage partner, I would not marry this person.	1	2	3	4	5
X. Professional Counseling Services					
39. I would seek premarital counseling before I got married.	1	2	3	4	5
40. I would like to attend marriage enrichment workshops.	1	2	3	4	5
41. I will seek education and/or counseling to learn about parenting.	1	2	3	4	5
42. I feel I need more education of what to expect from marriage.	1	2	3	4	5
43. I believe counseling is only for those couples in trouble.	1	2	3	4	5

Exploring Diversity Cross-National Comparisons of the Division of Housework

The comparative data included here about the division of household labor are representative of the kind of data family researchers gather through survey instruments. Presented in table format, as data typically are throughout this book, they can be used for many purposes. Look closely at Table 2.2. What do the numbers in the table actually represent?

Using data from the International Social Justice Project, a multination study of perceptions of social and economic justice, Shannon Davis and Theodore Greenstein examine perceptions of the division of household labor. Although they look at a number of issues in their analysis, we look here only at gender differences in perceptions of who bears responsibility for housework.

Their measure of the division of household labor is based on answers to the following question (translated into each country's native language): "Please tell me how the following responsibilities are divided. Are they always done by yourself, usually by yourself, equally between yourself and your partner, usually by your partner, or always by your partner? First of all, housework such as cooking, cleaning and laundry?"

Data from 10,153 respondents, 5,104 men and 5,049 women, are presented. All respondents were married and living with their spouses at the time of the interviews. The sample does not contain married *couples,* as only one spouse in a household was interviewed. Answers were re-coded into the following categories: always the wife, usually the wife, shared equally, usually the husband, always the husband. Individuals who gave answers other than these (as in paid help or someone else in the family) were excluded from the following findings.

In the following table, data are presented by country, first for men and then for women (with numbers of men and women in the country samples provided). We can compare countries or, by comparing the two rows within each country, see the extent to which gender differences separate men's and women's answers in each country. Study the table. What interesting things do you notice?

We can use these data in the table to note a number of different things. First, in each country, by both men's and women's accounts, women are responsible for housework. Similarly, looking at all countries together, 65.8% of males and 72.7% of females say housework is usually or always done by wives (columns 3 and 4).

Second, in each country, men and women differ in their responses about who does the housework in their households, with men nearly always indicating somewhat greater sharing than women credit men with. Perhaps this doesn't surprise you.

Third, the gender gap in asserting that housework is "always" done by wives is often wide. Only in the Czech Republic and Russia is it less than 10%. In countries such as Poland, East and West Germany, and the United Kingdom, it is nearly or in excess of 20%. Conversely, greater percentages of husbands than wives report that housework is "usually done by wives" everywhere but Russia and the United States. Combining the "always wife" and "usually wife" categories (into "usually or always wife") reduces the gender difference considerably and reveals what percentages of women and men attribute housework to women. With a single category of "usually or always wife," the gender difference is reduced to an average of 8% (ranging from 1.4% between male and female respondents in Bulgaria to a 13.3% difference between male and female West German respondents).

Fourth, combining the categories "always wife" and "usually wife" shows large variation across the 13 countries. Women's reports range from Russia, where women report housework is "usually" or "always" done by the wife in 37.4% of households, to Japan, where women report that they always or usually do the housework in 97.8% of households. Men's reports vary similarly across countries. Men report housework is "usually" or "always" done by wives in 30.3% of Russian households to 92.6% of Japanese households.

Fifth, by combining the last three columns, we can see the percentages of women and men who report that men do about half or more of the housework. There is a cross-national range here, too, from Japan, where 7.3% of men and 2.2% of women report men doing at least "almost equal" amounts of housework, to Russia, where 69.8% of the men and 61.7% of the women report men's involvement as "almost equal" or greater. In the United States, 43.2% of male respondents and 33.1% of female respondents said husbands shared "about equally" or usually or always did the housework.

Together, these data reveal that, in the United States and abroad, responsibility for domestic work rests heavily on women's shoulders. Along with other comparative survey research such as Jean Baxter's 5-country comparison and Makiko Fuwa's 22-country analysis, we can use the Davis and Greenstein data in the following table to demonstrate that in all countries studied the

Table 2.2 ■ Men's and Women's Responses across 13 Countries to Who Does the Housework?

Country	n = x	Always Wife (%)	Usually Wife (%)	Equal (%)	Usually Husband (%)	Always Husband (%)
Bulgaria						
Husband	497	20.3	49.3	25.8	2.2	2.4
Wife	482	37.6	33.4	27.6	1.2	0.2
Czech Republic						
Husband	372	19.6	48.1	30.6	0.8	0.8
Wife	359	22.0	38.7	37.3	1.9	0.0
Estonia						
Husband	279	7.9	43.4	44.1	4.3	0.4
Wife	275	21.5	40.7	35.3	1.5	1.1
West Germany						
Husband	428	22.2	51.6	21.5	1.2	3.5
Wife	356	50.6	36.5	11.0	1.4	0.6
East Germany						
Husband	292	12.3	52.4	31.2	2.1	2.1
Wife	297	37.7	37.7	23.9	0.7	0.0
Hungary						
Husband	314	26.1	37.9	30.9	1.9	3.2
Wife	309	39.8	30.7	26.9	1.9	0.6
Japan						
Husband	258	62.8	29.8	5.0	0.4	1.9
Wife	276	79.3	18.5	2.2	0.0	0.0
Netherlands						
Husband	608	22.4	51.2	25.3	1.0	0.2
Wife	510	39.8	41.8	17.6	0.8	0.0
Poland						
Husband	502	32.9	43.0	18.7	2.0	3.4
Wife	471	52.2	30.1	13.6	2.8	1.3
Russia						
Husband	499	3.8	26.5	66.7	2.6	0.4
Wife	494	9.3	28.1	60.1	1.4	0.2
Slovenia						
Husband	385	29.1	46.5	17.9	3.4	3.1
Wife	480	45.6	36.3	17.7	0.4	0.0
United Kingdom						
Husband	311	21.5	42.8	29.9	4.2	1.6
Wife	356	41.0	35.4	21.9	0.8	0.8
United States						
Husband	359	14.8	42.1	40.4	1.7	1.1
Wife	384	24.7	42.2	30.5	1.6	1.0
All Nations						
Husband	5,104	22.0	43.8	30.3	2.1	1.8
Wife	5,049	37.8	34.9	25.6	1.3	0.4

From Davis and Greenstein 2004.

Continues

Exploring Diversity Cross-National Comparisons of the Division of Housework—cont'd

responsibility for housework falls most heavily on women's shoulders (Baxter 1997; Fuwa 2004; Davis and Greenstein 2004).

Keep in mind that these data, like all questionnaire data, report only what people say; we do not have behavioral indicators of what they actually do. Furthermore, from these data alone we do not know why household chores are divided as they are. Nor do we know whether women and/or men object to this allocation of responsibilities; for that we would need more and different data.

Different theories, such as those raised earlier in this chapter, offer a range of explanations as to why tasks become divided by gender and what implications such divisions have. These sorts of issues are raised, and survey data such as these are used, throughout this book.

of children in public places?" Amato suggested that using "naturalistic observations," wherein people are unaware that they are being watched, eliminated the concern about potential face-saving or impression-making distortions to people's "real behavior." Using researchers strategically stationed in a variety of public places (for example, parks, shopping malls, and restaurants) in San Diego, California, and Lincoln, Nebraska, Amato compiled 2,500 observations of children with their male and/or female caretakers. He used such observations to test five hypotheses about adult male–child interaction (Amato 1989).

Overall, Amato found that 43% of the young children observed were cared for by men. His specific findings indicated that boys were more likely than girls to be looked after by a man; preschool children were most likely and infants were least likely to have male caretakers; male caretaking was highest in recreational settings and lowest in restaurants; male caretaking rates were higher among men who were accompanied by women than among men by themselves; and there were only modest differences between the California and the Nebraska locations. In addition to its substantive contributions, Amato's research showed that

■ *There are aspects of family life that can be easily observed, such as care for children in public.*

■ *What goes on at home, behind closed doors, may not be easily accessible to observational researchers.*

although not widely popular among family researchers, observational research can be used to study certain family phenomena.

Because a major limitation of strictly observational data is identifying meanings people attach to their behavior or attributing motives for why people are doing what they are observed doing, researchers often combine observational data with other sorts of data in a process known as **triangulation.**

As an example of triangulation, Jan R. Gerris, Maja Dekovic, and Jan M. Janssens (1997) examined whether social class affected the childrearing values and behaviors of a sample of 237 Dutch mothers and fathers. Researchers interviewed participants; administered a 25-minute "family interaction task" (puzzle solving by both parents and a target child), which they observed; and asked participants to complete a questionnaire detailing their childrearing techniques. The observational data were recorded on tape and later analyzed, along with the interview and questionnaire data, to identify a variety of ways in which social class effects surfaced in childrearing.

Experimental Research

In **experimental research,** researchers isolate a single factor under controlled circumstances to determine its influence. Researchers are able to control their experiments by using *variables,* aspects or factors that can be manipulated in experiments. Recall the earlier discussion of types of variables, especially independent and dependent variables. In experiments, independent variables are factors manipulated or changed by the experimenter; dependent variables are factors affected by changes in the independent variable.

Because it controls variables, experimental research differs from the previous methods we have examined. Clinical studies, surveys, and observational research are correlational in nature. Correlational studies measure two or more naturally occurring variables to determine their relationship to one another. Because correlational studies do not manipulate the variables, they cannot tell us which variable causes the others to change. But because experimental studies manipulate the independent variables, researchers can reasonably determine which variables affect the other variables.

Experimental findings can be powerful because such research gives investigators control over many factors and enables them to isolate variables. Researchers believing that stepmothers and stepfathers are stigmatized, for example, tested their hypothesis experimentally (Ganong, Coleman, and Kennedy 1990). They devised a simple experiment in which subjects were asked to evaluate 20 traits of a person in a family who was described in a short paragraph.

The person was variously identified as a father or mother in a nuclear family, a biological father or mother in a stepfamily, or a stepfather or stepmother in a stepfamily. When identified as a biological parent in either a nuclear family or a stepfamily, the individual was rated more favorably than when identified as a stepfather or a stepmother. This paper-and-pencil experiment confirmed the researchers' hypothesis that stepparents are stigmatized.

The obvious problem with such studies is that we respond differently to people in real life than we do in controlled situations, especially in paper-and-pencil situations. We may not stigmatize a stepparent in real life. Experimental situations are usually faint shadows of the complex and varied situations we experience in the real world.

Differences in sampling and methodological techniques help explain why studies of the same phenomenon may arrive at different conclusions. They also help explain a common misperception many of us hold regarding scientific studies. Many of us believe that because studies arrive at different conclusions, none are valid. What conflicting studies may show us, however, is that researchers are constantly exploring issues from different perspectives as they attempt to arrive at a consensus.

Researchers may discover errors or problems in sampling or methodology that lead to new and different conclusions. They seek to improve sampling and methodologies to elaborate on or disprove earlier studies. In fact, the very word *research* is derived from the prefix *re-,* meaning "over again," and *search,* meaning "to examine closely." And that is the scientific endeavor: searching and re-searching for knowledge.

Researching Long-Distance Relationships

We have come almost full circle. At the beginning of this chapter we posed a scenario in which "common sense" failed to resolve contradictory advice to a friend about the likely outcome of her long-distance relationship. We have revisited this issue throughout the chapter. It is now time to look at what researchers who have approached this phenomenon have learned.

Long-distance relationships are increasingly common, both within the college context and in the adult world (especially of two earner couples). In the 1990s, studies estimated that anywhere from 33% to more than 40% of romantic relationships among undergraduates were long-distance relationships (Sahlstein 2004).

Unfortunately, much of the research supports a pessimistic view of how long-distance relationships fare (Knox et al. 2002; Van Horn et al. 1997; Guldner 1996; Stafford and Reske 1990; Schwebel et al. 1992). Although they may not fail because once "out of sight, (we are) out of mind," they don't appear to hold up especially well over time. Using survey research techniques with samples of college students, K. Roger Van Horn (1997) and colleagues found that partners in long-distance romantic relationships reported less companionship, less disclosure, less satisfaction, and less certainty about the future together compared to partners in geographically close relationships. Comparing 164 students in long-distance relationships with 170 in geographically proximal relationships, Gregory Guldner (1996) reported that the separated partners showed more depressive symptoms. Andrew Schwebel and colleagues (1992) studied 34 men and 55 women in relationships in which they were separated by at least 50 miles from their partners. Within 9 weeks, nearly a quarter of the relationships had ended. Finally, David Knox and colleagues (2002) surveyed 438 undergraduates to test their belief in the "out of sight, out of mind" idea and to gauge their experiences of such relationships. Nearly 20% of the sample reported being in a long-distance relationship, here meaning separated by 200 miles or more. Of the sample, 37% reported having been in a long-distance relationship that ended. Although more than half of the sample with experience of a long-distance relationship had phoned and/or e-mailed several times a week, more than 40%

felt that the distance had worsened (20%) or ended (21.5%) their relationship. Conversely, 18% said that it "improved" their relationship. Having experienced a long-distance relationship made respondents more likely to believe "out of sight, out of mind."

The most optimistic findings suggest that long-distance relationships are not especially different from proximal relationships (Guldner and Swensen 1995). Comparing 194 students in long-distance relationships with 190 who were in geographically close relationships, Gregory Guldner and Clifford Swensen found that the two types of relationships were rated with about the same levels of self-reported relationship satisfaction and similar levels of intimacy, trust, and degree of relationship progress.

Although long-distance relationships clearly face obstacles that proximal relationships don't (for example, lack of time together and pressure to maximize quality of time partners do spend together), they also benefit from a determination to make their time special, to value each other's company in ways that couples who see each other easily and often may not (Sahlstein 2004). This hardly constitutes "making the heart grow fonder," but it is less negative than the other research.

Did *any* research support "absence makes the heart grow fonder?" The answer is yes, yet that itself may be problematic for healthy relationship development. Comparing 34 "geographically close" couples and 37 long-distance couples (separated by an average of 421.6 miles), Laura Stafford and James Reske found that long-distance couples were more satisfied with their relationships and with the level of communication they had. They also were by their assessments "more in love." Acknowledging the possibility that the long-distance relationships were "better" than the geographically closer relationships, Stafford and Reske go on to suggest that a process of *idealization* occurs in long-distance relationships, largely because of their more restricted communication (more phone calls and letters as opposed to face-to-face interaction and less overall interaction). As a consequence of this idealization, long-distance couples set themselves up for later problems that couples with less restricted communication (that is, geographically closer couples) avoid. They "may have little idea of how idealized and inaccurate their images (of their relationships) are" (Stafford and Reske 1990).

It is worth noting that even if all existing research painted a negative picture of what happens in

long-distance relationships, that does not mean that any particular relationship (that is, yours or your friend's) is destined to meet that unfortunate outcome. Family scientists seek to identify and account for patterns in social relationships. There are always going to be exceptions to any identified pattern. This is important for two reasons. First, don't assume that patterns reported in this book will happen in your life. Your experience may constitute an exception to the more general pattern. Second, and equally important, don't dismiss findings reported here because they don't fit your experiences or those of people you may know. Instead, try to account for why your experience departs from the more generally observed social regularities.

By using critical thinking skills and by understanding something about the methods and theories used by family researchers, we are in a position to more effectively evaluate the information we receive about families. We are also better able to step outside our personal experience, go beyond what we've always been told, and begin to view marriage and family from a sounder and broader perspective. In Chapters 3 and 4, we take such steps and explicitly examine the factors and forces that create differences in family experience.

Summary

- We need to be alert to maintain *objectivity* in our consideration of different forms of family lifestyle. *Opinions, biases,* and *stereotypes* are ways of thinking that lack objectivity.

- *Fallacies* are errors in reasoning. Two common types of fallacies are *egocentric fallacies* and *ethnocentric fallacies:* the belief that all people are, or should be, the same as we are or that our way of living is superior to all others.

- *Theories* attempt to provide frames of reference for the interpretation of data. Theories of marriage and families include family ecology, symbolic interaction, social exchange, family development, structural functionalism, conflict, and family systems.

- Theories are built from concepts, abstract ideas about reality. Conceptualization is the process of identifying and defining the concepts we are studying, and operationalization is the development of research strategies to observe our concepts.

- Deductive research tests hypotheses, statements in which we turn our concepts into variables and specify how variables are related to each other. An independent variable is a variable that influences or shapes our dependent variable. Intervening variables are those that follow our independent variables and have direct effects on dependent variables.

- Inductive research does not test hypotheses. It begins with a more general interest. As data is collected, concepts are specified in more detail leading to the development of hypotheses and to grounded theory.

- *Family ecology theory* examines how families are influenced by and, in return, influence the wider environments in which they function.

- *Symbolic interaction theory* examines how people interact and how we interpret or define others' actions through the symbols they communicate (their words, gestures, and actions). Symbolic interactionists study how social roles and personality interact.

- *Social exchange theory* suggests that we measure our actions and relationships on a cost–benefit basis. People seek to maximize their rewards and minimize their costs to gain the most favorable outcome. A corollary to exchange is *equity:* exchanges must balance out or hard feelings are likely to ensue. Exchanges in marriage can be either cooperative or competitive.

- *Family development theory* looks at the changes in the family, beginning with marriage and proceeding through seven sequential stages reflecting the interacting influences of changing roles and circumstances through time.

- *Structural functionalism theory* looks at society and families as though they were organisms containing different structures, each of which has a function. Structural functionalists study: (1) the functions the family serves for society, (2) the functional requirements performed by the family for its survival, and (3) the needs of individual members that are met

by the family. Family functions are usually divided along gender lines.

- *Conflict theory* assumes that individuals in marriages and families are in conflict with one another. Power is often used to resolve the conflict. Four important sources of power are legitimacy, money, physical coercion, and love.

- *Family systems theory* approaches the family in terms of its structure and pattern of interactions. Systems analysts believe that (1) interactions must be studied in the context of the family, (2) family structure can be seen only in the family's interactions, (3) the family is a system purposely seeking homeostasis (stability), and (4) family systems are transformed over time.

- *Feminist perspectives* provide an orienting focus for considering gender differences relating to family and social issues. In the writing, research, and advocacy of the feminist movement, the goals are to help clarify and remove oppressive conditions and barriers to opportunities for women. Recently the feminist perspective has been expanded to include constraints affecting black–white and gay–straight dichotomies. Such attention to gender gave rise to men's studies, a field in which scholars examine how masculinity and male socialization shape men's experiences, including their family lives.

- Family researchers apply the *scientific method*—well-established procedures used to collect information.

- Professional family researchers follow ethical principles to protect participants from having their identities revealed and to minimize the discomfort the subjects experience from their participation in the research.

- Research data come from surveys, clinical studies, and direct observation, in which naturally occurring variables are measured against one another. Data are also obtained from experimental research.

- *Survey research* uses questionnaires and interviews. They are more useful for dealing with societal or general issues than for personal or small-group issues. Limits of the method include (1) volunteer bias or an unrepresentative sample, (2) individuals' lack of self-knowledge, and (3) underreporting of undesirable or unconventional behavior.

- Frequently researchers conduct secondary analyses on already existing data. This allows researchers to examine large representative samples at little cost of time or resources.

- *Clinical research* involves in-depth examinations of individuals or small groups that have entered a clinical setting for the treatment of psychological or relationship problems. The primary advantage of clinical studies is that they allow in-depth case studies; their primary disadvantage is that the people coming into a clinic are not representative of the general population.

- In *observational research,* interpersonal behavior is examined in a natural setting, such as the home, by an unobtrusive observer. Major difficulties include the possibility that participants behave unnaturally, hide less acceptable behavior from researchers, and the fact that most family behavior is highly private. Further, one may not be able to know what the observed behavior means to those engaged in it.

- In *experimental research,* the researcher manipulates variables. Such studies are of limited use in marriage and family research because of the difficulty of controlling behavior and duplicating real-life conditions.

- To overcome limitations with any particular method, researchers often engage in triangulation, the use of multiple methods and/or multiple sources of data.

- Family researchers strive to identify and account for patterns of behavior. There will be exceptions to all patterns. Exceptions do not negate the importance or validity of research conclusions.

Key Terms

adaptation 39
ambiguous loss 41
anonymity 54
bias 36
case-study method 57
clinical research 57
conceptualization 37
confidentiality 54
conflict theory 49
deductive research 37
dependent variable 37
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Resources on the Internet

Companion Website for This Book

http://www.thomsonedu.com/sociology/strong

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