

## Chapter 10

### The Changing Family

#### 1. Overview of the Family

- Describe why many children throughout history have not lived in a nuclear family.
- Understand the status of the nuclear family in the United States since the colonial period.
- Describe the major marriage and family arrangements in the United States today.

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#### Section Outline

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- **Marriage and the Family in the United States Today:** Although marriage remains an important institution, two recent trends do suggest that its importance is declining for some segments of the population. First, although 71 percent of adults have been married, this figure represents a drop from 85 percent in 1960. Second, education greatly affects whether we marry and stay married, and marriage is less common among people without a college degree.
- People with no more than a high school are less likely than college graduates to marry at all, and they are more likely to get divorced, as we shall discuss again later, if they do marry. This difference in marriage rates worsens the financial situation that people with lower education already face.
- **The United States Compared to Other Democracies:** Americans place more emphasis than their Western counterparts on the ideal of romantic love as a basis for marriage and other intimate relationships and on the

cultural importance of marriage. The United States has higher rates of marriage than other Western nations. The United States also has higher rates of divorce than other Western nations; for example, 42 percent of American marriages end in divorce after fifteen years, compared to only 8 percent in Italy and Spain.

- **Children and Families:** The United States has about 36 million families with children under 18. About 70 percent of these are married-couple families, while 30 percent (up from about 14 percent in the 1950s) are one-parent families. Most of these latter families are headed by the mother. The proportion of families with children under 18 that have only one parent varies significantly by race and ethnicity: Latino and African American families are more likely than white and Asian American households to have only one parent.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Although the nuclear family has been very common, many children throughout history have not lived in a nuclear family, in part because a parent would die at an early age.
- Most Americans eventually marry. This fact means that marriage remains an important ideal in American life, even if not all marriages succeed.
- About 30 percent of children live with only one parent, almost always their mother.

## **For Your Review**

1. Write a brief essay in which you describe the advantages and

disadvantages of the 1950s-type nuclear family in which the father works outside the home and the mother stays at home.

2. The text notes that most people eventually marry. In view of the fact that so many marriages end in divorce, why do you think that so many people continue to marry?
3. Some of the children who live only with their mothers were born out of wedlock. Do you think the parents should have married for the sake of their child? Why or why not?

## Key Terms

- **Family** -- A group of two or more people who are related by blood, marriage, adoption, or a mutual commitment and who care for one another.
- **Nuclear Family** -- A family composed of two parents and their children living in the same household.
- **Extended Family** -- A family in which parents, children, and other relatives live in the same household.

### 2. Sociological Perspectives on the Family

- Summarize understandings of the family as presented by functional, conflict, and social interactionist theories

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### Section Outline

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- **Social Functions of the Family Head:** The family is the primary unit for *socializing children*. No society is possible without adequate socialization of its young. In most societies, the family is the major unit in which

socialization happens. Parents, siblings, and, if the family is extended rather than nuclear, other relatives all help socialize children from the time they are born

- **The Family and Conflict:** Because families pass along their wealth to their children, and because families differ greatly in the amount of wealth they have, the family helps reinforce existing inequality. As it developed through the centuries, and especially during industrialization, the family also became more and more of a patriarchal unit (since men made money working in factories while women stayed home), helping to reinforce men's status at the top of the social hierarchy.
- **Families and Social Interaction:** According to the symbolic interactionist perspective, family problems often stem from the different understandings, perceptions, and expectations that spouses have of their marriage and of their family. When these differences become too extreme and the spouses cannot reconcile their disagreements, spousal conflict and possibly divorce may occur.

### **Key Takeaways**

- The family ideally serves several functions for society. It socializes children, provides practical and emotional support for its members, regulates sexual reproduction, and provides its members with a social identity.
- Reflecting conflict theory's emphases, the family may also produce several problems. In particular, it may contribute for several reasons to

social inequality, and it may subject its members to violence, arguments, and other forms of conflict.

- Social interactionist understandings of the family emphasize how family members interact on a daily basis. In this regard, several studies find that husbands and wives communicate differently in certain ways that sometimes impede effective communication.

## For Your Review

1. As you think how best to understand the family, do you favor the views and assumptions of functional theory, conflict theory, or social interactionist theory? Explain your answer.
2. Do you think the family continues to serve the function of regulating sexual behavior and sexual reproduction? Why or why not?

### 3. Changes and Problems in American Families

- Discuss why the US divorce rate rose during the 1960s and 1970s and summarize the major individual-level factors accounting for divorce today.
- Describe the effects of divorce for spouses and children.
- Summarize the evidence on how children fare when their mothers work outside the home.
- Describe the extent of family violence and explain why it occurs.

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### Section Outline

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- **Cohabitation:** The census reports that about 6 million opposite-sex couples are currently cohabiting; these couples constitute about 10 percent of all opposite-sex couples (married plus unmarried) who live together. The average cohabitation lasts less than two years and ends when the

couple either splits up or gets married; about half of cohabiting couples do marry, and half split up. More than half of people in their twenties and thirties have cohabited, and roughly one-fourth of this age group is currently cohabiting.

- **Divorce and Single-Parent Households:** The US divorce rate has risen since the early 1900s, with several peaks and valleys, and is now the highest in the industrial world. It rose sharply during the Great Depression and World War II, probably because of the economic distress of the former and the family disruption caused by the latter, and fell sharply after the war as the economy thrived and as marriage and family were proclaimed as patriotic ideals. It dropped a bit more during the 1950s before rising sharply through the 1960s and 1970s . The divorce rate has since declined somewhat and today is only slightly higher than its peak at the end of World War II. Still, the best estimates say that 40–50 percent of all new marriages will one-day end in divorce.
- **Effects of Divorce and Single-Parent Households:** Much research exists on the effects of divorce on spouses and their children, and scholars often disagree on what these effects are. One thing is clear: Divorce plunges many women into poverty or near-poverty Many have been working only part time or not at all outside the home, and divorce takes away their husband’s economic support. Even women working full time often have trouble making ends meet, because many are in low-paying jobs. One-parent families headed by a woman for any reason are much poorer than

those headed by a man.

- **Marriage and Well-Being:** Recent research generally finds that marriage does benefit both sexes: Married people, women and men alike, are generally happier than unmarried people (whether never married, divorced, or widowed), score better on other measures of psychological well-being, are physically healthier, have better sex lives, and have lower death rates. There is even evidence that marriage helps keep men from committing crime.
- **Working Mothers and Day Care:** Research finds that day-care children exhibit better cognitive skills (reading and arithmetic) than stay-at-home children but are also slightly more likely to engage in aggressive behavior that is well within the normal range of children's behavior. This research has also yielded two other conclusions. First, the quality of parenting and other factors such as parent's education and income matter much more for children's cognitive and social development than whether or not they are in day care. Second, to the extent that day care is beneficial for children, it is high-quality day care that is beneficial, as low-quality day care can be harmful.
- **Racial and Ethnic Diversity in Marriages and Families:** Studies of Latino and Asian American families find they have especially strong family bonds and loyalty. Extended families in both groups and among Native Americans are common, and these extended families have proven a valuable shield against the problems all three groups face because of their

race/ethnicity and poverty.

- The status of the African American family has been the source of much controversy for several decades. Perhaps the major reason for this controversy is the large number of African American children living in single-parent households: Whereas 41 percent of all births are to unmarried women (up from 28 percent in 1990), such births account for 72 percent of all births to African American women.
- **Child Abuse:** Children can be physically or sexually assaulted, and they may also suffer from emotional abuse and practical neglect. Whatever form it takes, child abuse is a serious national problem.

### **Key Takeaways**

- The divorce rate rose for several reasons during the 1960s and 1970s but has generally leveled off since then.
- Divorce often lowers the psychological well-being of spouses and their children, but the consequences of divorce also depend on the level of contention in the marriage that has ended.
- Despite continuing controversy over the welfare of children whose mothers work outside the home, research indicates that children in high-quality day care fare better in cognitive development than those who stay at home.
- Violence between intimates is fairly common and stems from gender inequality, income inequality, and several cultural myths that minimize the

harm that intimate violence causes.

- At least 800,000 children are abused or neglected each year in the United States. Because most abused children do not report the abuse, the number of cases of abuse and neglect is undoubtedly much higher.

## For Your Review

1. Think of someone you know (either yourself, a relative, or a friend) whose parents are divorced. Write a brief essay in which you discuss how the divorce affected this person.
2. Do you think it is ever acceptable for a spouse to slap or hit another spouse? Why or why not?

## Key Terms

- **Cohabit** -- To live together in a romantic, sexual relationship without being married.
- **Intimate Violence** -- Violence between spouses, ex-spouses, and current and former sexual partners.
- **Child Abuse** -- Maltreatment of children in the form of physical or sexual assault, emotional trauma, or neglect.

### 4. Families in the Future

- Understand the implications of social science theory and research for how to address family problems.

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### Section Outline

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- Sociological theory and research, along with research from the other social sciences, have important implications for how our society should address

the various family issues discussed in this chapter.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Efforts to help children and families living in poverty or near poverty should be expanded.
- Efforts to help preserve marriages should proceed cautiously or not at all for highly contentious marriages.

## **For Your Review**

1. Why do you think the United States lags behind other democracies in efforts to help families?
2. What do you think is the single most important policy or action that our government should take to help America's families?