Today’s Americans, like those before them, place a high value on the family. Most of us hope to experience ongoing happiness in committed unions and families. A 2004 Monitoring the Future survey of high school seniors reports that 82 percent of girls and 70 percent of boys say that having a good marriage and family life is “extremely important” to them (Whitehead and Pope- noe 2006, Figure 14).

Yet we may wonder about the chances of finding family happiness. There continue to be long-term, happy marriages. But some who would like to marry or form a committed relationship have not yet found partners. The high divorce rate has called into question the stability of marriage. Recent books talk about “conjugal succession,” perhaps a series of marriages for each person (Paul 2002, p. 251).

We remain hopeful about family commitment and fulfillment. Families are central to society as an institution and to our everyday lives. They undertake the pivotal tasks of raising children and providing intimacy, affection, and companionship to members.

Hoping alone won’t make enduring or emotionally satisfying families. Maintaining a family requires both commitment and knowing what you’re doing. This theme of knowledge plus dedication is a good part of what this book is about. We will return to it later in this chapter and throughout the text. Right now, though, we need to discuss what a family is.

### Defining Family

What is a family? In everyday conversation we make assumptions about what families are or should be. Traditionally, both law and social science have specified that the family consists of people related by blood, marriage, or adoption. Some definitions of the family have also specified a common household, economic interdependency, and sexual and reproductive relations (Murdock 1949). The U.S. Census Bureau defines a family as “a group of two or more persons related by blood, marriage, or adoption and residing together in a household” (U.S. Census Bureau 2006c, p. 6).

In their classic work The Family: From Institution to Companionship 1953 [1945], Ernest Burgess and Harvey Locke think of the family as a primary group, a term coined by early sociologist Charles Cooley (1909) to describe any group in which there is a close, face-to-face relationship. In a primary group, people communicate

---

An indirect indicator of the centrality of the family to American life is the degree to which family themes are used as advertising motifs. In the first photo, a family smiling happily in the ocean fronts an ad for “Hottest Hotels,” while the text of the second photo describes the family life of the father and the child pictured in the photo.

---

**Teaching Tip:** Assign students to the cohesive ness building exercise on page 1 of “Lecture Ideas,” Vol. 1.

**Teaching Tip:** Assign students to write down their definition of “family” (e.g., who is included, who is not included, whether they are related, and what the important functions and values of families are, etc.).
A primary group is a small group marked by close, face-to-face relationships. Group members share experiences, express emotions, and, in the ideal case, know they are accepted and valued. In many ways, families, friends, and teams are similar primary groups: Joys are celebrated spontaneously, tempers can flare quickly, and expression is often physical.

With one another as whole human beings. They laugh and cry together, they share experiences, and they quarrel, too, because that’s part of being close. Primary groups can give each of us the feeling of being accepted and liked for who we are.

Burgess and Locke’s view of family companionship, however, was more limited than current views. It assumed that family interaction occurred primarily in the context of traditional (heterosexual, married-couple, gender-differentiated) social roles, rather than emphasizing spontaneity, individuality, and intimacy. Today’s social scientists continue to recognize the family’s important responsibility in performing necessary social roles, such as child rearing, economic support, and domestic maintenance. But many social scientists (including us) place more emphasis on companionship and emotional support than did Burgess and Locke. Moreover, today family members are not necessarily bound to each other by legal marriage, by blood, or by adoption but may experience family relationships and commitment in other forms (Struening 2002, p. 15).

Burgess and Locke specified that family members “constitute a household,” that is, people residing together. We would expand their definition to include, for example, commuter couples, noncustodial parents, parents with adult children living elsewhere, extended kin such as aunts and uncles, and adult siblings and stepsiblings. In other words, the term family can identify relationships beyond partners, parents, and children living in one household.

How expansive can a definition of family be? When asked to list their family members, some of our students include their dogs, cats, or other pets. Are pets family members? “Issues for Thought: Pets as Family?” poses this question.

**There Is No Typical Family**

Until recently, societal attitudes, religious beliefs, and law converged into a fairly common expectation about what form the American family should take: husband, wife, and children in an independent household—the nuclear family model.

Today, only 7 percent of families fit the 1950s nuclear family ideal of married couple and children, with a husband-breadwinner and wife-homemaker (Fields 2004, p. 2; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2006a, Table 4). Social scientists no longer assume that a family has a male breadwinner and a female homemaker; dual-career families are common, and there are reversed-role families (working wife, househusband). There is a proliferation of different family forms: single-parent families, stepfamilies, cohabiting heterosexual couples, gay and lesbian families, and three-generation families.

Figure 1.1 displays the types of households in which Americans live. The concept of household is broader than that of “family” as it includes nonfamilial living arrangements as well. The most common household type today is that of married couples without children, where the children have grown up and left or the couple has not yet had children or doesn’t plan to. Less than a quarter of households are nuclear families of husband, wife, and children; this compares to 44 percent in 1960 (Casper and Bianchi 2002, p. 8).

About as many households (26.4 percent) are maintained by individuals living alone as by married couples with children. There are also female-headed (7.3 percent) and male-headed (1.7 percent) single-parent households, unmarried couple households (5.1 percent), and

**Clicker/Discussion Tip:** Ask students for examples of different types of households present in the US today (e.g. heterosexual dual earner couple without children), write these on the board, and facilitate discussion around the trends and prevalence rates.
No statistics on pets appear in the “Facts about Families: American Families Today” box later in this chapter. Should there be? Dogs and cats are called “companions” animals.” Are pets family members?

Pets are present in 58 percent of American households. Almost 80 percent of families with children have pets. Most people own pets think of them as part of the family. A large majority of dog and cat owners refer to themselves as “mommy” or “daddy” with reference to their pets (American Veterinary Medical Association 2002; Block 2002; Edmondson and Galper 1998; Gardyn 2002; Voith 1985). “[A]t least for some urban dwellers, pets are inside the family circle,” concludes a recent study of pet owners (S. Cohen 2002). A recent dramatic example of this attachment to pets was the refusal of many pet owners to evacuate from New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina without their pets (A. Parker 2006).

People talk to their pets and believe that they understand. An American Kennel Club study found that both dog owners (79 percent) and nonowners (63 percent) say a person is “not alone” if a dog is there (Umminger and Pompa 2005). Stores carry greeting cards for pets to “send” to their humans on important family occasions (“Pet Lovers . . .” 2002), and almost 6 million pet owners celebrate their dog’s birthday (Darlin 2006).

Some pet owners take their animals to day care, spas, psychotherapy, acupuncture, massage, swimming lessons, and photo shoots. They vacation with them at hotels with expensive pet pampering facilities and, of course, give them gifts, often expensive (Alexander 2003; Gardyn 2002; Gunderson 2006; Howard 2005; Newman 2005). Health care for a pet can involve a $1,200 MRI or kidney dialysis or transplant. So it may not be too surprising that some owners buy pet health insurance and set up trust funds to care for a pet after their death (Darlin 2005; Mott 2005). Some have deposited their pet’s DNA for future cloning (Eisenberg 2005).

Pet owners are willing to spend money on pet health care because losing a pet can be very painful. In some states, a bereaved owner may sue for emotional suffering or loss of companionship if a pet is accidentally or intentionally killed by a third party (L. Parker 2005). Even for those who don’t claim a disability need for an animal’s presence, pets are important “companions” animals.” A study of children and pets finds that pets perform certain support functions for children, particularly as providers of comfort and esteem and as an audience for secrets (McNicholas and Collis 2004). Pets seem to increase family adaptability and reduce stress. Studies suggest that the presence of pets can help when owners are lonely or depressed, or during a family crisis (Karen Allen 2002).

In the words of one veterinary researcher, “Clearly, dogs are assuming more importance in people’s lives” (Gail Golab in Egan 2001, p. 24). Caroline Knapp’s Pack of Two (1999) points to changes in the family—more people living alone, delayed marriage, cohabitation, and the deferral of parenthood—that have opened a void that pets may fill. In The New Work of Dogs (2003), journalist Jon Katz argues that dogs used to have work responsibilities, tending sheep and the like. Now companion animals have an important new role—that of sustaining the mental health and emotional equilibrium of their owners in an era of work pressures and insecure family lives.

As the tendency to think of pets as family continues and especially as spending on pets grows, some are uneasy about giving so much attention to animals when the needs of society’s children are so great. Another, more philosophical, concern involves the “humanization” of pets—which is animals truly human (Masters 2005). It used to be that “a pet was a pet” and “there was a very clear boundary as to what you would do” (veterinarian Robert Gilbert in J. Brody 2001, p. 4). There is also some concern about the pressures placed on pets and the potential for mistreatment that could occur when owners become disappointed that their needs are not met (Katz 2003).

For those who worry that pets are replacing people in emotional networks (L. Simon 1984), recent research is reassuring: “[N]ot even the most bondeds person believes his or her pet is human. Pets seem to occupy an overlapping but different space from humans in a family” (S. Cohen 2002, p. 633).

Critical Thinking

Do you think of pets as family members? Dogs, cats, or any and all pets? Is it appropriate to broaden the definition of family to include other than humans? What changes in the family may have encouraged changes in our attitudes about pets?

other family households containing relatives other than spouses or children (7.5 percent). “Facts about Families: American Families Today” presents additional information about today’s families.

The increasing family and household diversity that we see now has led some scholars to argue that the new family diversity is ‘an intrinsic feature . . . rather than a temporary aberration of contemporary family life” (Stacey 1996, p. 37, quoting Castro Martin and Bumpass 1989, p. 49).

Sociologist Frank Furstenberg’s definition of the family captures this diversity: “My definition of ‘family’

Clicker/Discussion Tip: Ask, how many students have pets? Ask, how many consider their pets to be family members? Then, ask a few students to share their thoughts/situations, and help facilitate discussion around the importance of acknowledging diverse family definitions.
FIGURE 1.1 The many kinds of American households, 2004. A household is a person or a group of people who occupy a dwelling unit. This figure displays both family and nonfamily households.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2005a, Table 1101; 2006b, Tables 53, 57.

* Unmarried-couple households may be composed of two male partners (6.5 percent); two female partners (6.1 percent); or a heterosexual couple (87.4 percent). The Census Bureau classifies unmarried-couple households as "nonfamily households."

includes membership related by blood, legal ties, adoption, and informal ties including "fictive or socially agreed upon kinship" (Furstenberg 2005, p. 810). Laura Dawn’s book of stories about people who, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, took in people whom they didn’t know, describes "how strangers became family" (Dawn 2006).

New Definitions of the Family

Not only social scientists and legal scholars are rethinking the family. The definitional problem has moved out of the academy and into the wider world. As families have become less traditional, the legal definition of a family has become more flexible. Law, government agencies, and to some extent private bureaucracies such as insurance companies must make decisions about what a family is. If zoning laws, rental practices, employee privileges, and insurance policies cover families, decisions must be made

In a world of demographic, cultural, and political changes, our views of family structure and life cycle have begun to broaden. For example, today there are more single-parent families, gay partners and parents, remarried families, and families in which adult children care for their aging parents. Whatever their form, families can remain a center of love and support.

Clicker/Discussion Tip: Facilitate discussion around the diverse and changing structure of US Households by asking polling questions such as: how many think that nuclear families make up more 75% of all households in the US; how many think it's closer to 25%; how many think it's closer to 10% or less?

Clicker/Discussion Tip: Ask students to list factors/issues on the board which are influenced by the particular definition of "family" that is followed (e.g. housing, health benefits/insurance, etc.), and facilitate discussion around this.
American Families Today a, b

What do U.S. marriages and families look like today? Statistics can’t tell the whole story of the family, but they are an important beginning. Later chapters will discuss these family situations in more detail.

The demographic data presented in this box are generalizations that do not take into account differences among various sectors of American society. In Chapter 3 we will explore that social diversity, but for now, let’s look at these overall statistics.

Critical Thinking
As you read these facts about families, think about today’s American family. What do these statistics tell you about the strengths and weaknesses of the contemporary American family and about family change?

1. Fewer people are currently married. Fifty-two percent of the adult population was currently married in 2005, compared to 62 percent as recently as 1990. Twenty-nine percent have never married; 10 percent are divorced, and 6 percent widowed (U.S. Census Bureau 2006b, Table A1; 2006c, Table 50).

2. People have been postponing marriage in recent years. In 2005, the median age at first marriage was 25.8 for women, 27.1 for men, compared to 20.8 for women and 23.5 for men in 1970. Marriage remains an almost universal experience; 91 percent of adults have been married or plan to marry (Bergman 2006a; Saad 2006b).

3. Cohabitation has emerged as a new family form as well as a transitional lifestyle choice. From 1990 to 2000 there was a 72 percent increase in the number of unmarried-couple households (Simmons and O’Connell 2003). Unmarried-couple families are only 5 percent of households at any one time, but more than 50 percent of first marriages were preceded by cohabitation (Smock and Gupta 2002).

   Some cohabiting relationships seem to be alternatives to marriage rather than a transition to marriage or a temporary living arrangement. “Increasing rates of cohabitation have largely offset decreasing rates of marriage” (Bramlett and Mosher 2001, p. 2). More than 40 percent of heterosexual cohabiting couples lived with children under eighteen in 2003. These might be children of the couple or children from a previous marriage or relationship (Fields 2004).

4. Some cohabitants maintain gay and lesbian domestic partnerships. Not all cohabiting couples are heterosexual. Almost 500,000 same-sex couple households were reported to the 2000 census (U.S. Census Bureau 2003a, Table 69). Twenty-two percent of male same-sex partner households and 34 percent of female same-sex households include children (Simmons and O’Connell 2003). (Cohabitation is discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.)

5. The number of people living alone is substantial. Single-person households now represent over a quarter of American households (Bergman 2006a). Delayed marriage is a contributing factor, as is the comparatively good health and economic situation of older people (enabling unmarried seniors to choose to live independently). Because of the increased number of people living alone and the smaller number of children per family, the average size of a U.S. household dropped from 3.14 people in 1970 to 2.57 in 2005 (U.S. Census Bureau 2006b, Table AVG1).

6. Many adult children live with their parents. Of young adults age eighteen to twenty-four, 56 percent of men and 46 percent of women lived with parents in 2003. The others are more apt to cohabit or to live with roommates than to live alone (or with spouses). In the twenty-five to thirty-four age group, 52 percent live with spouses, but 14 percent of men and 7 percent of women live with parents (Fields 2004).

7. There are other multigenerational households. Some 3.7 percent of all households are multigenerational—that is, composed of three generations of family members. These are more likely to be found in areas of new immigration; in areas where there are housing shortages or high costs; and in areas where there are high proportions of unwed mothers who live with their families. The most common form of multigenerational household (65 percent) is that of a grandparent providing a home for an adult child and grandchildren. Some 2 percent of multigenerational households contain four generations (Simmons and O’Neill 2001).

8. Parenthood is increasingly postponed and fertility has declined. From a high point
of 3.6 children per woman in 1957, the **total fertility rate** dropped to 1.7 in 1976 (Weeks 2002, p. 238). It then rose and has been around two children per woman for a decade and a half (Martin et al. 2005). Childlessness has increased in recent decades. Almost twice as many women (19 percent) reached their fortieth in 2004 without becoming mothers as in 1976. Rates of childlessness seem to be leveling off now, though (Dye 2005).

A more common pattern is delayed childbearing. The twenties are still the most fertile ages for women, but a striking shift toward births in older age groups has occurred since 1990. Births to teens are at historic low levels (Hamilton, Ventura, Martin, and Sutton 2006, Figure 1).

9. The nonmarital birth rate has begun to increase again after a period of stability. Births to unmarried mothers were 37 percent of all births in 2005 compared to half that in 1980 and 4 percent in 1950. Keep in mind that almost half of nonmarital births occur to cohabiting couples (Cherlin 2005; Deen 2005; Dye 2005; Hamilton et al. 2006; Hamilton, Martin, and Ventura 2006; Martin et al. 2005).

10. Divorce rates have stabilized, although they remain at high levels. The divorce rate, which had risen slowly from the mid-nineteenth century onward, doubled from 1965 to the end of the 1970s. Then it began to drop, falling 30 percent between 1980 and 2004 (Cherlin 2005; U.S. Census Bureau 2006c, Tables 72, 117).

The majority of married adults have married only once, and most of those who divorced are currently remarried. Still, between 40 and 50 percent of recent first marriages are likely to end in divorce (Kreider 2005; Kreider and Fields 2002; Whitehead and Popone 2006). Remarriage rates have declined, but remain high. Three-quarters of divorced women remarry within ten years. Remarriage rates of men are even higher (Bramlett and Mosher 2001).

12. The population is aging. The movement of the large baby boom generation into their senior years has implications for family caregiving. This will be a generation of elderly who had smaller families as well as higher divorce rates than in the past, so fewer involved adult children are available to take responsibility. At the same time, this generation of older Americans has lower levels of disability and poverty and higher levels of education, and many are likely to remain independent longer (Bergman 2006c).

13. A much higher proportion of older men than older women are married. Seventy percent of men 65 and older are married, compared to 41 percent of women in that age group. Older women are more likely to be widowed (44 percent) than men (14 percent).

Older Americans are most likely of all age groups to be living alone. Only 7 percent of older men and 17 percent of older women lived with relatives (He et al. 2006, Chapter 6; U.S. Census Bureau 2006c, Table 52).

---

Teaching Tip: Have students get into small groups to discuss and list strengths and weaknesses of the contemporary American family based on the “Facts about Families: American Families Today” on pages 6 and 7.

...
One advertisement portrays a happy gay family, making the statement that this is a home like any other. Advertisers have departed from the safe image of the nuclear family to portray nontraditional family forms, as well as family crises such as divorce, as we see in the other photo. The second photo goes so far as to take a rather lighthearted view of divorce. Advertisers say they are trying to accurately reflect their customers, many of whom do not fit into the nuclear-family tableau often seen in commercials” (Bosman 2006; see also Lauro 2000).

about which groups of people can be considered a family. The Sept. 11th Victim Compensation Fund struggled with this issue in allocating compensation to survivors of September 11 victims. New York State law was amended to permit commission discretion in making awards to both heterosexual and gay partners (Gross 2002), while

President Bush signed a federal bill extending benefits to domestic partners of firefighters and police officers who lose their lives in the line of duty (M. Allen 2002).

Some employers as well have sought to redefine family in applying their benefits policies. A majority of the Fortune 500 companies now offer domestic partner benefits, as do thirteen state governments, and 201 city and county governments (Human Rights Campaign 2006). Federal practices permit low-income unmarried couples to qualify as families and live in public housing. Some states provide some state-level spousal rights to same-sex couples, while the state of Massachusetts now allows same-sex marriage (Human Rights Campaign 2005). Same-sex marriage is discussed further in Chapter 8.

In defining family in cases that come before them, judges who depart from a traditional definition have used the criteria of common residence and economic interdependency, along with the more intangible qualities of stability and commitment (Dunphy v. Gregor 1994). From this point of view, the definition of family “should not rest on fictitious legal distinctions or genetic history, but instead should find its foundation in the reality of family life. . . . [I]t is the totality of the relationship as evidenced by the dedication, caring and self-sacrifice of the parties which should, in the final analysis, control” (Judge Vito Titone in Braschi v. Stahl Associates Company 1989).

We, the authors, have worked to balance in this text an appreciation for flexibility and diversity in family advertisements. Have students write a short reaction paper explaining what they found and the possible influence of these representations on societal expectations.
structure and relations—and for freedom of choice—with the increased concern of many social scientists about what they see as diminished marital and child-rearing commitment. We have adopted a definition of the family that combines elements of some definitions discussed here. "A family is any sexually expressive or parent-child or other kin relationship in which people—usually related by ancestry, marriage, or adoption—(1) form an economic unit and care for any young, (2) consider their identity to be significantly attached to the group, and (3) commit to maintaining that group over time." This definition combines some practical and objective criteria with a more social-psychological sense of family identity.

We hope our definition and the others will stimulate your thoughts and discussion about what a family is. Ultimately, there is no one correct answer to the question "What is a family?" To begin to think more about your own definition of "family," you might want to examine "Issues for Thought: Which of These Is a Family?"

To a significant extent, the diversity that we see in families today is a result, over time, of people's making personal choices about family living. We turn now to a discussion of such choices.

The Freedom and Pressures of Choosing

This text is different from others you may have read. It is not intended specifically to prepare you for a particular occupation. Instead, it has three other goals: (1) to help you understand your past and present family situations and anticipate future possibilities; (2) to help you appreciate the variety and diversity among families today; and (3) to make you more conscious of the personal decisions you must make throughout your life and of the societal influences that affect those decisions.

As families have become less rigidly structured, people have made fewer choices "once and for all." Of course, previous decisions do have consequences, and they represent commitments that limit later choices. Nevertheless, many people reexamine their decisions about family—and face new choices—throughout the course of their lives. Thus choice is an important emphasis of this book.

The best way to make decisions about our personal lives is to make them knowledgeably. It helps to know something about all the alternatives; it also helps to know what kinds of social pressures affect our decisions. As we'll see, people are influenced by the beliefs and values of their society. There are structural constraints, economic and social forces, that limit personal choices.

In a very real way, we and our personal decisions and attitudes are products of our environment.

But in just as real a way, people can influence society. Individuals create social change by continually offering new insights to their groups. Sometimes social change occurs because of conversation with others. Sometimes it requires forming social organizations and becoming politically involved. Sometimes it involves many people living their lives according to their values even when these differ from more generally accepted group or cultural norms.

We can apply this view to the phenomenon of living together, or cohabitation. Forty years ago, it was widely accepted that unmarried couples who lived together were immoral. But in the seventies, some college students challenged university restrictions on cohabitation, and subsequently many more people than before—students and nonstudents, young and old—chose to live together. As cohabitation rates increased, societal attitudes became more favorable. Over time, cohabitation has become "mainstream" (Smock and Gupta 2002). Many religions and individuals continue to object to cohabitation outside marriage. Still, it is now easier for people to choose this option. We are influenced by the society around us, but we are also free to influence it. And we do that every time we make a choice.

Personal Troubles and Societal Influences

People's private lives are affected by what is happening in the society around them. In his book The Sociological Imagination (2000 [1959]), sociologist C. Wright Mills developed the notion that personal troubles are connected to events and patterns in the larger social world. Many times what seem to be personal troubles are shared by others, and these troubles often reflect societal influences. When a family breadwinner cannot find work, for example, the cause may not lie in his or her lack of ambition but rather in the economy's inability to provide a job. The difficulty of juggling work and family is not usually just a personal question of individual time management skills but of society-wide influences—the totality of time required for employment, commuting, and family care in a society that provides limited support for working families.

This text assumes that people need to understand themselves (and their problems) in the context of the larger society. Individuals' choices depend largely on the alternatives that exist in their social environment and on cultural values and attitudes toward those alternatives. Moreover, if people are to shape the kinds of family living they want, they must not limit their attention to their own marriages and families.
Making knowledgeable family decisions increasingly means getting involved in national and local political campaigns. One’s role as a family member, as much as one’s role as a citizen, has come to require participation in public policy decisions so as to create a desirable context for family life and family choices. Although no social policy can guarantee “ideal” families, such policies may contribute to a good foundation for family life.

Social Influences and Personal Choices

Social factors influence people’s personal choices in three ways. First, it is always easier to make the common choice. In the 1950s and early 1960s, when people tended to marry earlier than they do now, it was more difficult for women to remain single after graduation and for men to remain unmarried past their mid-twenties. Now, staying single longer is a more comfortable choice.

A second way that social factors can influence personal choices is by expanding people’s options. For example, the availability of effective contraceptives makes limiting one’s family size, if desired, easier than in the past and enables deferral of marriage with less risk that a sexual relationship will lead to pregnancy. New forms of reproductive technology provide new options for parenthood.

Third, social factors can also limit people’s options. As one example, American society has never offered polygamy (more than one spouse) as a legal option. Those who would like to form plural marriages risk prosecution (Janofsky 2001). Until the 1967 Loving v. Virginia Supreme Court decision, a number of states prohibited racial intermarriage. Presently the possibility of same-sex marriage is being contested in the courts, with only the state of Massachusetts offering it (as we go to press). More broadly, economic changes of the last thirty years, which make well-paid employment more problematic and higher education more essential, have influenced individual choices to delay marriage (Sassler and Goldscheider 2004).

Making Choices

All people make choices, even when they are not aware of it. Let’s look more closely at two forms of decision making—choosing by default and choosing knowledgeably—along with the consequences of each. One effect of taking a course in marriage and the family may be to make you more aware of when choices are available and how a decision may be related to subsequent options and choices.

Choosing by Default

Unconscious decisions are called choosing by default. Choices made by default are ones that people make
Extended education, delayed marriage, and high housing costs, among other financial pressures, have made it more common for young adults to continue to live with their parents or to move back home. There is less of a “generation gap” between parents and children today—they seem to enjoy each other’s company.

when they are not aware of all the alternatives or when they pursue the proverbial path of least resistance. If you’re taking this class, for example, but you’re unaware that a class in modern dance (which you would have preferred) is meeting at the same time, you have chosen not to take the class in modern dance. But you have done so by default because you didn’t find out about all the alternatives before you registered.

Another kind of decision by default occurs when people pursue a course of action primarily because it seems the easiest thing to do. Sometimes, college students choose their courses or even their majors by default. They try to register only to find that the classes they had planned to take are closed. So they register for something they hadn’t planned on, do well enough, and continue in that program of study.

Many decisions concerning marriages and families are also made by default. For example, spouses may focus on career success to the neglect of their relationship simply because this is what society expects of them. Strong day-to-day pressures on the job may erode family time. The goal of spending more time with the family is on the horizon but is never reached because it is not consciously planned for.

Although most of us have made at least some decisions by default, almost everyone can recall having the opposite experience: choosing knowledgeable. Figure

1.2, “The Cycle of Knowledgeable Decision Making,” maps this process. You may want to look back at this figure as you go through the course and think about the decisions to be made at various life stages.

Choosing Knowledgeably

Today, society offers many options. People can stay single, cohabit, or marry. They can form communal living groups or family-like ties with others. They can decide to divorce or to stay married. Couples or individuals can have children biologically, with the aid of reproductive technology, or through adoption. They can parent stepchildren or foster children. One important component of choosing knowledgeable is recognizing as many options or alternatives as possible. This text is designed in part to help you do that.

A second component in making knowledgeable choices is recognizing the social pressures that may influence personal choices. Some of these pressures are economic, whereas others relate to cultural norms that are often taken for granted. Sometimes people decide that they agree with socially accepted or prescribed behavior. They concur in the teachings of their religion, for example. Other times people decide that they strongly disagree with socially prescribed beliefs, values, and standards. Whether they agree with such standards or not, once people recognize the force of social pressures, they can choose whether or not to act in accordance with them.

An important aspect of making knowledgeable choices is considering the consequences of each alternative rather than just gravitating toward the one that initially seemed most attractive. For example, a couple deciding whether to move so that one partner can be promoted or take a new job may want to list the consequences. In the positive column, one partner may have a higher position and earn more money, and the region to which the couple would move may have a nicer climate. In the negative column, the other partner may have to disrupt his or her career, and both may have to leave relatives. Listing positive and negative consequences of alternatives—either mentally or on paper—helps one see the larger picture and thus make a more knowledgeable decision.

Part of this process requires becoming aware of your values and choosing to act consistently with them. Contradictory sets of values exist in American society. For example, standards regarding nonmarital sex range from
abstinence to sex in committed relationships to sex for recreation only. Contradictory values can cause people to feel ambivalent about what they want for themselves.

Clarifying one's values involves cutting through this ambivalence in order to decide which of several standards, for example, are more strongly valued. It is important to respect the so-called gut factor—the emotional dimension of decision making. Besides rationally considering alternatives, people have subjective (often almost visceral) feelings about what feels right or wrong, good or bad. Respecting one's feelings is an important part of making the right decision. Following one's feelings can mean grounding one's decisions in a religious or spiritual tradition or in one's cultural heritage, for these have a great deal of emotional power and often represent deep commitments.

Another important component of decision making is rechecking. Once a choice is made and a person acts on it, the process is not necessarily complete. As Figure 1.2 suggests, people constantly recheck their decisions throughout the entire decision-making cycle, testing these decisions against their experiences and against any changes in the social environment.

Underlying this discussion is the assumption that individuals cannot have everything. Every time people make an important decision or commitment, they rule out alternatives—for the time being, and perhaps permanently. People cannot simultaneously have the relative freedom of a child-free union and the gratification that often accompanies parenthood.

In some respects, though, people can focus on some goals and values during one part of their lives, then turn their attention to different ones at other times. Four decades ago, we used to think of adults as people who entered adulthood in their early twenties, found work, married, had children, and continued on the same track until the end of the life course. That view has changed. Today we view adulthood as a time with potential for continued personal development, growth, and change.

In a family setting, development and change involve more than one individual. Multiple life courses must be coordinated, and if one member changes, that affects the values and choices of other members of the family. Moreover, life in American families reflects a tension in American culture between family solidarity and individual freedom.

A Family of Individuals

Americans place a high value on the family. Ninety-one percent of Americans report that family relations are extremely important to them (Bogenschneider 2000, p. 1138).
Midlife changes can be both exhilarating and intimidating, as these college students have probably found. Certainly the decision of a middle-aged adult to earn a college degree involves many emotional and practical changes. But by making knowledgeable choices—by weighing alternatives, considering consequences, clarifying values and goals, and continually rechecking—personal decisions and changes can be both positive and dynamic.

Families as a Place to Belong

Whether families are conventional nuclear families or newer in form, they create a place to belong, serving as a repository or archive of family memories and traditions. They provide a setting for the development of identity, both a family identity and an individual self-concept.

Whatever the future course of an individual's adult life, familial experiences and relationships are likely to have a profound influence on identity. Parents, especially, and siblings and other relatives are usually the most influential or significant figures in a young child's life. The responses of those other people channel the development of the child's self-concept, an individual's idea about his or her worth and about what sort of person she or he is. A child who is loved comes to think he or she is a valuable and loving person. A child who is given some tasks and encouraged to do things comes to think of him- or herself as competent.

Family identities and traditions emerge through interaction within the family and the creation of rituals—family dinnertime, birthday and holiday celebrations, vacation trips or homes, and hobbies, such as working together in a garden each summer. Family identity typically includes the cultural heritage of the family. All the children in one family may be given Irish or Hispanic names, for example.

Meanwhile, expressing our individuality within the context of a family requires us to negotiate innumerable day-to-day issues. How much privacy can each person have at home? What things and places in the family dwelling belong just to one particular individual? What family activities should be scheduled, how often, and when? What outside friendships and activities can a family member sustain?

Familistic (Communal) Values and Individualistic (Self-Fulfillment) Values

Familistic values such as family togetherness, stability, and loyalty focus on the family as a whole. They are communal values; that is, they emphasize the needs, goals, and identity of the group. Many of us have an image of the ideal family in which members spend considerable time together, enjoying one another's company. For many of us, the family is a major source of stability. We tend to believe that the family is the group most deserving of our loyalty. Those of us who marry vow publicly to stay with our partners as long as we live. We expect our partners, parents, children, and even our more distant relatives to remain loyal to the family unit.

But just as family values permeate American society, so do individualistic (self-fulfillment) values. These American values encourage people to think in terms of personal happiness and goals and the development of a distinct individual identity. An individualistic orientation gives more weight to the expression of individual preferences and the maximization of individual talents and options.

American society has never had a remarkably strong tradition of familism, the virtual sacrifice of individual family members' needs and goals for the sake of the extended family (the larger kin group) (Sirjamaki 1948; Lugo Steidel and Contreras 2003). Our national cultural heritage prizes individuality, individual rights, and personal freedom. But on the other hand, an overly individualistic orientation could put stress on family relationships if there is little emphasis on contributing to other family members' happiness or postponing personal satisfactions in order to attain family goals.

Teaching Tip: Pass out a copy of a measure of familism (e.g., Bardis, 1959) or individualism/collectivism (e.g., Triandis, 1995) and facilitate discussion to illustrate the different values families and individuals may follow.

Film/Video Tip: Show the class a short clip from a movie (e.g., Tortilla Soup) that highlights the clash of differing values as members of an immigrant family find themselves at different levels of acculturation.
"Family Decline" or "Family Change"?

As students interested in the family, you are no doubt aware of the current debate about the state of the family. Family change has become the stuff of talk radio, academic analysis, and political debate. Critics have described it as "family breakdown." "Many argue that family life has been seriously degraded by the movement away from marriage and traditional gender roles. Others view family life as amazingly diverse, resilient, and adaptive to new circumstances" (Bianchi and Casper 2000, p. 3).

The tension between familistic and individualistic values is an issue in current debate on the family. The pull of both familistic (communal) values and individualistic values creates in society and in ourselves a tension that we must resolve. "It is within the family... that the paradox of continuity and change, the problem of balancing individuality and allegiance, is most immediate" (Bengston, Biblarz, and Roberts 2007, p. 323).

Sociologist John Sirjamaki (1948), writing in the optimistic and stable post–World War II era, concluded that the emotional attachment of spouses would ensure family stability. Some contemporary family advocates are not so sure: Scholars and advocates with a "family decline" perspective (e.g., Whitehead and Popenoe 2006) point to what they see as a cultural change toward excessive individualism that they characterize as the self-indulgence of the baby boom generation. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead writes: "Beginning in the late 1950’s, Americans began to change their ideas about the individual’s obligations to family and society. . . [T]his change was away from an ethic of obligation to others and toward an obligation to self" (1997, p. 4). There is concern that the pursuit of self-realization underlies the increase in divorce and unmarried parenthood and has undermined responsible parenting (Whitehead and Popenoe 2006).

The debate over the family is grounded in data about family change since 1960: Marriage age rose, and the proportion of the adult population married declined; cohabitation increased; single-mother families increased; and child poverty increased, creating concern about the care and socialization of children as well as the best interests of adults. Combined with increased longevity and lower fertility rates, these changes have meant that a smaller portion of adulthood is spent in marriage and/or child rearing (Brooks 2002; Cherlin 2005; McLanahan, Donahue, and Haskins 2005; Whitehead and Popenoe 2006). Moreover, fewer family households contain children (see "Facts about Families: Focus on Children"). According to the "family decline" perspective, this situation "has reduced the child-centeredness of our nation and contributed to the weakening of the institution of marriage" (Popenoe and Whitehead 2005, p. 23). ("Facts about Families: Focus on Children" provides some statistical indicators of the family setting of today’s children).

Not every family expert concurs that the family is in decline: "family change," yes, but not "decline." Historically speaking, family change is seen as normal: "Marriage has been in a constant state of evolution since the
Facts about Families

Focus on Children

Perhaps the greatest concern Americans have about contemporary family change is its impact on children. What do these family data tell us about the family lives of children today?

1. There are now fewer children (and more elderly). Children under eighteen composed 25 percent of the U.S. population in 2005, a substantial drop from 1964, when 30 percent of the population were children (U.S. Census Bureau 2007a, Table 4; U.S. Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics 2006, p. 4; and see Figure 1.3). Fewer than half of all married-couple households contained children in 2005, and only 47 percent of all family households (U.S. Census Bureau 2006a). Today—as a consequence of later marriage, lower fertility, and a longer lifespan—a smaller part of Americans’ adult lives are spent raising children (Whitehead and Popenoe 2006).

2. A majority of children live in two-parent households. “Two married parents are the norm” (R. Bernstein 2003). After an earlier decline, the percentage of children living with two married parents has been essentially stable for the last ten years. In 2005, 67 percent of children under eighteen lived with two married parents. Twenty-eight percent of children lived with only one of their parents (23 percent with mother; 5 percent with father), and the other 4 percent did not live with either parent (U.S. Federal Interagency Forum 2006, p. 4).

Of those not living with any parent, the largest group of children (44 percent) was cared for by grandparents, 33 percent by other relatives, while the rest were in foster care or other nonfamily arrangements (U.S. Federal Interagency Forum 2005, pp. 8–9).

3. Over the last five years, the proportion of children living in single-parent families has stabilized. Single-parent households grew rapidly in the first half of the 1990s. Since then the percentage of children in single-parent households has declined slightly. There are four times as many single-mother households as single-father households (U.S. Federal Interagency Forum 2005, p. 8, Figure POP6-A).

The census category “single-parent family household” obscures the fact that there may be other adults present in that household, such as grandparents. It is also the case that some households defined by the Census Bureau as single-parent households are actually two-parent households. In 18 percent of “single-father” households and 11 percent of "single-mother" households there is a cohabiting partner (U.S. Federal Interagency Forum 2005, p. 9). The Census Bureau assumes that such a partner functions as a second parent (Fields 2003, pp. 4–5).

4. There is considerable variation in children’s living arrangements. A 2001 study on the living arrangements of children in two-parent households found 88 percent of children living with their biological parents (3 percent unmarried), 6 percent with biological mother and stepfather, 1 percent with biological father and stepmother, 1 percent with adoptive mother and father, 1 percent with adoptive father and biological mother, and smaller numbers with an adoptive mother and biological father or an adoptive parent and a stepparent (Kreider and Fields 2005, Table 1).

A snapshot taken at one time understates family instability. A child continues
may live in an intact two-parent family, a single-parent household, with a cohabiting parent, and in a remarried family in sequence (Raley and Wildsmith 2004). More than half of American children are expected to live in a single-parent household at some point in their lives. On average, a child can expect to spend 3 years in a single-parent household, 1.5 years with a cohabiting parent, and 11.5 years with married parents (perhaps including a stepparent) (Bumpass and Lu 2000).

5. Children are more likely to live with a grandparent today than in the recent past. In 1970, 3 percent of children lived in a household containing a grandparent, but by 2001 that rate had more than doubled, to 9 percent. In about a quarter of the cases, grandparents had sole responsibility for raising the child, but many households containing grandparents are extended family households that include other relatives as well (Kreider and Fields 2005, Tables 7, 8, 10).

6. Most parents are working parents. Almost two-thirds of children in married-couple households have two working parents. Children in single-parent households are even more likely to be living with employed parents (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2006a, Table 4).

7. Children are more likely than the general population or the elderly to be living in poverty. In 2005, the poverty rate of children stood at 17.6 percent, whereas that of the general adult population was 11.1 percent and that of the elderly 10.1 percent. The child poverty rate is lower now than its peak of 22.3 percent in 1983, but higher than in 1970 (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Lee 2006). We will discuss the economic circumstances of families further in Chapters 3 and 12.

dawn of the Stone Age,” declares historian Stephanie Coontz (2005a, p. A-17). “Marriage has...[now] become more flexible, but also more optional” (Coontz 2005a, p. A-17), with new options of cohabitation or a satisfying and respected single life, “But although the institution of marriage is undergoing a powerful revolution, there is no marriage crisis” (Speaker Says... 2006, p. 5).

For those concerned about family change over the past several decades, there may be some encouraging signs. The divorce rate has declined somewhat over the last twenty-five years. The rate of nonmarital childbearing has leveled off somewhat, and there has been a dramatic decline in teen birth rates. As demographers Suzanne Bianchi and Lynne Casper observe: “Our rhetoric about the dramatically changing family may be a step behind reality. Recent trends suggest a quieting of changes in the family, or at least of the pace of change” (2000, p. 3).

Generally, “family change” scholars argue that in many ways families are better off today than in the past. In the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, families were more apt to live in extreme poverty. Families were often broken up by illness and death, and children sent to orphanages, foster homes, or already burdened relatives. Single mothers, as well as wives in lower-class, working-class, and immigrant families, were not home with children, but went out to labor in factories, workshops, or domestic service. Nonmarital pregnancy rates were higher in the 1950s than they are today (Coontz 1992; Yorburg 2002). The proportion of children living with father only in 1990 wasn’t much different from that of a century ago (Kreider and Fields 2005, p. 12).

Some scholars and policy makers argue further that broad cultural values of individualism and collectivism have not changed all that much. For instance, data from the Longitudinal Study of Generations suggest that an earlier upward trend in individualism may have reversed since the early 1970s and that after this period, the “historical trend is toward greater collectivism” (Bengston, Billarz, and Roberts 2002, p. 119). Moreover, many Americans would not wish to return to an era in which marriage served property and practical ends, not the happiness of the couple. Researchers Arland Thornton and Linda Young-DeMarco, who studied attitudes toward family in the second part of the twentieth century, conclude that “Americans increasingly value freedom and equality in their personal and family lives.

A relative (Raymond) of one of the authors, born in 1904, lost his mother at age seven. Relatives urged that Raymond and his siblings be placed in an orphanage, but his father kept them at home and eventually remarried. The father died when Raymond was fifteen. Raymond continued to live with his stepmother, who was a most caring and supportive figure, but she soon died as well. He then lived with a series of older siblings, who pressured him to drop out of high school. Raymond persisted in working to support his continued education and eventually became a physician (Ritter 1990).
while at the same time maintaining their commitment to the ideas of marriage, family, and children" (2001, p. 1031). Scholars and policy makers with a “family change” perspective do not ignore the difficulties which divorce and nonmarital parenthood present to families and children. But they view the family as “an adaptable institution” (Amato et al. 2003, p. 21) and argue that it makes more sense to provide support to families as they exist today rather than to attempt to turn back the clock to an idealized past. They attribute family change as much to economic trends and changes as to cultural change.

They point to the structural forces that have affected decisions to marry and created stress on family life: the decline in manufacturing jobs that used to provide solid support for working-class families, the insecurity of even middle-class jobs and the inability of income to keep pace with inflation, the related need for more education, and the entry of women into the labor force. These economic trends have shaped marital timing, fertility rates, and the willingness and ability of lower-income individuals especially to enter into a marriage (Cherlin 2005; Edin and Kefalas 2005; McLanahan, Donahue, and Haskins 2005). “Accompanying . . . the economic changes was a broad cultural shift among Americans that eroded norms both of marriage before childbearing and of stable lifelong bonds after marriage” (Cherlin 2005, p. 46).

Moreover, families are struggling with new economic and time pressures that affect their ability to realize their family values. “Family change” scholars “believe that at least part of the increase in divorce, living together, and single parenting has less to do with changing values than with inadequate support for families in the U.S., especially compared to other advanced industrial countries” (Yorburg 2002, p. 33). Many European countries, for example, have family leave policies that enable parents to take time off from work to be with young children and that provide more generous economic support for families in crisis.

This debate about the family is explored further in Chapter 7. As scholars, family advocates, and the public continue “this crucial national conversation among Americans struggling to interpret and make sense of the place of marriage and family in today’s society” (Nock 2005, p. 13), we ask: What does this mean at the ground level of married couples (and other partners)?

**Partners as Individuals and Family Members**

The changing shape of the family has meant that family lives have become less predictable than at the mid-twentieth century. The course of family living results in large part from the decisions and choices two adults make, moving in their own ways and at their own paces through their lives. Assuming that partners’ respective beliefs, values, and behaviors mesh fairly well at the point of marriage, any change in either spouse is likely to adversely affect the fit.

One consequence of ongoing adult developmental change in two individuals is that the marriage may be at risk. If one or both change considerably over time, they may grow apart instead of together. A challenge for contemporary relationships is to integrate divergent personal change into the relationship while nurturing any children involved.

How can partners make it through such changes and still stay together? Two guidelines may be helpful. The first is for people to take responsibility for their own past choices and decisions rather than blaming previous “mistakes” on their mates. The second is for individuals to be aware that married life is far more complex than the traditional image commonly portrayed.
It helps to recognize that a changing spouse may be difficult to live with for a while. A relationship needs to be flexible enough to allow for each partner’s individual changes—to allow family members some degree of freedom.

At the same time, we must remind ourselves of the benefits of family living and the commitment necessary to sustain it. Individual happiness and family commitment are not inevitably in conflict; research shows that a supportive marriage has a significant positive impact on individual well-being (Waite and Gallagher 2000). We will continue to explore the tension between individualistic and familistic values throughout this text.

### Marriages and Families: Four Themes

In this chapter, we have defined the term *family* and discussed decision making and diversity in the context of family living. We can now state explicitly the four themes of this text.

1. **Personal decisions must be made throughout the life course.** Decision making is a trade-off; once we choose an option, we discard alternatives. No one can have everything. Thus, the best way to make choices is knowledgeably.

2. **People are influenced by the society around them.** Cultural beliefs and values influence our attitudes and decisions. Societal or structural conditions can limit or expand our options.

3. **We live in a society characterized by considerable change, including increased ethnic, economic, and family diversity; by tension between familistic and individualistic values; by decreased marital and family permanence; and by increased political and policy attention to the needs of children and families.** This dynamic situation can make personal decision making more challenging than in the past and more important.

4. **Personal decision making feeds into society and changes it.** We affect our social environment every time we make a choice. Making family decisions can also mean choosing to become politically involved in order to effect family-related social change. Making family choices consciously, according to our values, gives our family lives greater integrity.

### Summary

- This chapter introduced the subject matter for this course and presented the four themes that this text develops. The chapter began by addressing the challenge of defining the term *family*.
- In “Facts about Families: American Families Today” and “Facts about Families: Focus on Children,” we pointed to statistical evidence that we live in a changing society. Family diversity has progressed to the point that there is no typical family form today.
- Marriages and families are composed of separate, unique individuals. Our culture values both families and individuals.
- Families fill the important function of providing members a place to belong and grounding identity development. Finding personal freedom within families is an ongoing, negotiated process.
- Whether we are in an era of “family decline” or “family change” is a matter of debate.
- People make choices, either actively and knowledgeably or by default, that determine the courses of their lives. People must make choices and decisions throughout their life course. Those choices and decisions are limited by social structure and at the same time are causes for change in that structure.
- It is now widely recognized that change and development continue throughout adult life. Because adults change, marriages and families are not static. Every time one individual in a relationship changes, the relationship changes, however subtly. Throughout this text, we will discuss some creative ways in which partners can alter their relationship in order to meet their changing needs.
- We continue our examination of the family in Chapter 2, “Exploring the Family,” and in Chapter 3, which discusses the social context in which families make choices. Within a socially diverse society such as ours, many individuals are part of a racial/ethnic or religious community or social class that has a distinct family heritage.
Questions for Review and Reflection

1. Without looking to find ours, write your definition of family. Now compare yours to ours. How are the two similar? How are they different? Does your definition have some advantages over ours?

2. What important changes in family patterns do you see today? Do you see positive changes, negative changes, or both? What do they mean for families, in your opinion?

3. What are some examples of a personal or family problem that is at least partly a result of problems in the society?

4. Do you want your family life to be similar to or different from that of your parents? In what ways?

5. **Policy Question.** Are there changes in law and social policy that you would like to see put in place to enhance family life?

Key Terms

- choosing by default 10
- choosing knowledgeably 11
- extended family 13
- familistic (communal) values 14
- family 2
- "family change" perspective 14
- "family decline" perspective 14
- household 3
- individualistic (self-fulfillment) values 13
- nuclear family 3
- primary group 2
- secondary group 2
- self-concept 13
- structural constraints 9
- total fertility rate 7

Online Resources

**Companion Website for This Book**

[www.thomsonedu.com/sociology/lananna](http://www.thomsonedu.com/sociology/lananna)

Visit the book companion website, where you will find flash cards, practice quizzes, Internet links, suggested readings, InfoTrac College Edition exercises, and more to help you study.

**ThomsonNOW® for Marriage and Family**

Spend time on what you need to master rather than on information you already have learned. Take a pre-test for this chapter, and ThomsonNOW will generate a personalized study plan based on your results. The study plan will identify the topics you need to review and direct you to online resources such as videos, narrated learning modules, and interactive activities to help you master those topics. You can then take a post-test to help you determine the concepts you have mastered and what you will still need to work on. Try it out! Go to [www.thomsonedu.com/login](http://www.thomsonedu.com/login) to sign in with an access code or to purchase access to this product.