peers. The responses of these other people channel the development of the child's self-concept. Family identity and traditions emerge through interaction, with the growth of relationships and the creation of rituals (Bosssard and Boll 1943; Fiese et al. 2002).

A related concept is that of meaning—what a given activity or statement conveys symbolically. For example, a man's or woman's domestic work may symbolize love and family caring (Nippert-Eng 1996), or it may be seen as boring and unappreciated, and therefore demeaning. The difference in meaning has a strong effect on spouses' satisfaction with their division of labor.

Selves and interaction have much to do with roles, or positions in the social structure that have associated behavior expectations. Even young children connect certain behaviors to the different roles of mother, father, teacher, police officer, and so on, and much of their play consists of imitating these visible roles. Role-taking, or playing out the expected behavior associated with a social position, is how children begin to learn behavior appropriate to the roles they may play in adult life. When they later assume specific family or occupational roles, they continue to learn appropriate behavior by observing and interacting with others. Behavior and attitudes associated with roles become internalized, or incorporated into the self.

Thinking about families in interactionist terms, researchers investigate questions such as the following: How do two separate individuals interact in a marriage or a committed partnership to fashion a couple identity (P. Berger and Kellner 1970)? How do families define the appropriateness of feelings (Hochschild 1979)? What acts or objects symbolize a family's idea of itself (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993)? What kinds of role-making take place in families, as they adapt typical family roles of husband and wife to their own preferences? Perhaps a husband will do the typical masculine chores at home, while the wife cooks and cleans, but both are heavily involved in child care and both take responsibility for earning the family's living.

Interaction theory is difficult to specify with precision because it implies that each family is different and that behavior does not have a single meaning but can be variously interpreted by the individuals involved. This can be very difficult to get at in research focused on the interior of the family. Often family members are asked about their thoughts and behavior, rather than being observed, although the method of participant observation (discussed later in this chapter), is also used.

The Utility of the Interactionist Perspective. An often-voiced criticism of the interactionist perspective is that it makes intuitive sense but is difficult to test empirically. A related criticism is that because it is qualitative and relatively subjective, the research connected with the interactionist perspective lacks rigor.

Enthusiasts of the interactionist perspective have gone a long way to refute these criticisms by using quantitative methods and carefully documenting fieldwork. A longitudinal study of the impact of group membership on self-concept confirmed Cooley's notion that social feedback shapes the self-concept, a process he termed the looking-glass self (Yeung and Martin 2003). Fred Davis's Passage through Crisis (1991 [1963]), a study of families in which a child contracted polio, remains significant today in its insightful analysis of the impact on family dynamics of a child's health crisis.

Perhaps the most serious criticism of interactionism is that it overestimates the power of individuals to create their own realities, ignoring the extent to which humans inhabit a world not of their own making. However, the intersection between family choices and norms of the wider world may be a focus of interesting research. Sociologist Kristin Park studied the interaction strategies employed by voluntarily childless couples, who have a stigmatized family identity. Some couples employed defensive strategies, making a claim of biological inability to have children. Others aggressively asserted the merits of a child-free lifestyle (Park 2002).

Interactionists have not always been sensitive to cultural variation, instead taking interaction to be the same in all settings. The interactionist perspective needs to be expanded to consider an important question: "How do geography, race/ethnicity, class, gender, age, and time relate to family interaction?" (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993, p. 36). There is in fact a growing interest in how culture shapes interactionist concepts. A study comparing Americans and certain Asian societies found the latter to have a self-concept that was more interdependent, situated in...
ties to others, than was true of the Americans studied, who had a much more autonomous and independent sense of the self (P. Smith and Bond 1993, pp. 93–99).

Exchange Theory

Exchange theory is the application of an economic perspective to social relationships. Developed around 1960 and flourishing during the 1960s and 1970s, this orientation focuses on how individuals’ personal resources such as education, income, physical attractiveness, and personality affect their formation of and continuation in relationships. This theory also considers how a person’s emotional involvement and dependence on a relationship affects her or his relative power in the relationship.

The basic premise of exchange theory is that people use their resources to bargain and secure advantage in relationships. The exchange of rewards and costs among participants shapes power and influence in the family, the household division of labor, and commitment to the relationship (Sabatelli and Shehan 1993). Rewards and costs can be material or nonmaterial: gifts, travel, and entertainment; maintenance of a home; economic support; affection, sex, emotional support, and communication; help in meeting other family members’ needs; being considerate of in-laws and friends of the partner, and so on.

Marriages tend to take place between people of equal social status (see Chapter 9). Relationships based on exchanges that are equal or equitable (fair, if not actually equal) thrive, whereas those in which the exchange balance feels consistently one-sided are more likely to dissolve or be unhappy. Decision making within a marriage, as well as decisions to divorce and responses to domestic violence, are affected by the relative resources of the spouses. People without resources or alternatives to a relationship typically defer to the preferences of others and are less likely to leave a relationship (Brehm et al. 2002; Sprecher and Schwartz 1994; Van Yperen and Buunk 1990).

Looking back, one can see the beginnings of this theory in the work of Willard Waller, who identified the principle of least interest. The partner with less commitment to the relationship is the one who has more power, including the power to exploit the other. The spouse who is more willing to break up the marriage or to shatter rapport and refuse to be the first to make up can maintain dominance (Waller 1951, pp. 190–92).

Recent longitudinal research on dating couples found the principle of least interest alive and well in the late twentieth century. Partners in a dating relationship did tend to feel they each had different levels of involvement. The less-involved members felt they had more control over the continuation or ending of the relationship. Relationship satisfaction and stability, however, were associated with equal emotional involvement (Sprecher, Schmeckle, and Felmee 2006).

Exchange theory must fight the human tendency to see family relationships in more romantic and emotional terms. Yet dating relationships, marriage and other committed partnerships, divorce, and even parent–child relationships show signs of being influenced by the relative assets of the parties. Money is power, and the children of wealthier parents are more likely to share their parents’ values, for example (Luster, Rhoades, and Haas 1989). “Parents with fewer resources may find it difficult to enforce discipline and influence their children’s behavior” (economist Robert Pollak in Belt 2000, p. 22).

The Utility of Exchange Theory As applied to the family, exchange theory is subject to the criticism that it assumes a human nature that is unrealistically rational and even cynical at heart about the role of love and responsibility. Exchange theorists do consider the emotional attachment and commitment that make couples concerned about their partner’s rewards as well as their own. But they also note that inequality and/or an unfavorable balance of
rewards and costs tend to erode positive feelings over the long term (Brehm et al. 2002). Maybe exchange theory tells us things we don’t want to know: about the conscious or unconscious role of power, calculation of resources, and emotional and material dependency in marriage and other family relations. But if we do understand the role of exchange in relationships, we can act to make them more equitable.

**Family Systems Theory**

**Family systems theory** is an umbrella term for a wide range of specific theories that look at the family as a whole. Originating in natural science, systems theory was applied to the family by psychotherapists and was then adopted by family scholars and practitioners in other disciplines.

A **system** is a combination of elements or components that are interrelated and organized into a whole. Like an organic system (the body, for example) or a mechanical or a cybernetic system (a computer), the parts of a family make a whole that is more than the sum of the parts. A family functions regularly in a certain way; emotional expression and behavior of family members tend to persist. **Put another way, systems tend toward equilibrium.** Like a computer program directing a space vehicle, information about behavior provides feedback to the system, which then adjusts itself. Change in the external environment or in one of the internal parts sets in motion a process to restore equilibrium (Whitchurch and Constantine 1993).

In family dynamics, this tendency toward equilibrium puts pressure on a changing family member to revert to his or her original behavior within the family system. For change to occur, the family system as a whole must change. Indeed, that is the goal of family therapy based on systems theory. The family may see one member as the problem, but if the psychologist draws the whole family into therapy, the family system should begin to change. Without therapeutic intervention, the family may replicate problem behaviors over the generations. Similarly, it might be unrealistic for a spouse to attempt to resolve marital difficulties by leaving the family (by divorcing). Family systems theorists would expect that an individual would be likely to re-create a family system similar to the one that she or he left.

Social scientists have moved systems theory away from its therapeutic origins to employ it in a more general analysis of families. They have been especially interested in **how family systems handle information, deal with problems, respond to crises, and regulate contact with the outside world. Family boundaries, as well as the closeness or distance between family members, are important issues in systems theory (D. Kantor and Lehr 1975).** Systems theorists are interested in how families maintain a sense of family identity through rituals and holiday celebrations (Broderick 1993, Chapter 7).

**The Utility of Family Systems Theory** Criticism of the family systems perspective has often related to its lack of specificity: So the family is a system—then what? In working concretely with families in therapy, however, a family systems approach may be very useful to both therapists and clients. If family members come to understand how their own family system operates, they can use this knowledge to achieve desired goals. Moreover, specific conceptual frameworks have emerged that go beyond the basic idea of a system (e.g., D. Kantor and Lehr 1975).

To look at the family as a system can be a creative perspective for research. Rather than seeing only the influence of parents on children, for example, system theorists are sensitized to the fact that this is not a one-way relationship, and they have explored *Children's Influence on Family Dynamics: The Neglected Side of Family Relationships* (Crouter and Booth 2003).

Researchers have used concepts such as family boundaries as research starting points. For example, boundary ambiguity (Boss 1997) is common in stepfamilies: Do children of divorced parents belong to two (or more) families? Are former spouses and their relatives part of the family (S. Stewart 2005a)?

The study of family systems is methodologically complex (O’Brien 2005). Another weakness of systems theory is that it does not take note of social structure. Transactions with a particular family’s external world of work, school, religious affiliation, and extended family may be addressed, but the overall structure of economic opportunity, racial/ethnic and gender stratification, and other features of the larger society are not analyzed.

Systems theory tends to diffuse responsibility for conflict by attributing dysfunction to the system. This makes it difficult to extend social support to victimized family members while establishing legal accountability for others, as in incest or domestic violence (M. Stewart 1984).

But systems theory often gives family members insight into the effects of their behavior. It may make visible the hidden benefits or costs of certain family patterns. For example, doctors were puzzled by the fact that death rates were higher among kidney dialysis patients with supportive families. Family systems theorists attributed the higher rates to the unspoken desire of the patients to lift the burden of care from the close-knit family they loved (D. Reiss, Gonzalez, and Kramer 1986).

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**Teaching Tip:** Present some basic information on arranged marriages (e.g., definition, frequency, etc.) and discuss the application of Exchange Theory to arranged marriages compared to “love” marriages.

**Film Video Tip:** Show a short clip from a movie (e.g., Tortilla Soup) or sitcom (e.g., “Everybody Loves Raymond”) which illustrates concepts of Family Systems Theory, such as boundaries, coalitions, equilibrium, etc.
Conflict and Feminist Perspectives

We like to think of families as beneficial for all members. For decades, sociologists talked about how traditional family roles were functional for society, ignoring the politics of gender and differentials of power and privilege within the family.

The conflict and feminist perspectives bring latent conflict and inequality into the open. A first way of thinking about the conflict perspective is that it is the opposite of structure–functional theory. Not all a family’s practices are good; not all family behaviors contribute to family well-being; what is good for one family member is not necessarily good for another. Family interaction can include domestic violence as well as holiday rituals—sometimes both on the same day.

Conflict theory calls attention to power—more specifically, unequal power. It explains behavior patterns such as the unequal division of household labor in terms of the distribution of power between husbands and wives. Because power within the family derives from power outside it, conflict theorists are keenly interested in the political and economic organization of the larger society.

The conflict perspective traces its intellectual roots to Karl Marx, who analyzed class conflict. Applied to the family by Marx’s colleague Friedrich Engels (1942 [1884]), the conflict perspective attributed family and marital problems to class inequality in capitalist society.

In the 1960s, a renewed interest in Marxism sparked the application of the conflict perspective to families in a different way. Although Marx and Engels had focused on economic classes, the emerging feminist movement applied conflict theory to the sex/gender system—that is, to relationships and power differentials between men and women in the larger society and in the family.

Although there are many variations within the feminist perspective, the central focus is on gender issues. A unifying theme is that male dominance in family and society is oppressive to women. Patriarchy, the idea that men dominate women in all societies, is a central concept.

The Utility of Conflict and Feminist Perspectives

The conflict and feminist perspectives examine inequality within the family. Moreover, the feminist perspective brings attention to women and their experiences (Osmond and Thorne 1993). Women’s domestic work was largely invisible in social science until feminist theories began to treat household labor as work that has economic value.

The application of feminist perspectives has permitted us to see some things about families that had been overlooked before. Social scientists became aware of wife abuse, marital rape, child abuse, and other forms of domestic violence. These family behaviors had been there all along, but not remarked upon or treated as social problems. Feminists have pointed to the unequal division of labor in the home and asserted the oppressive nature of conventional men’s and women’s roles for both sexes.

Unlike the perspectives described earlier, which were developed primarily by scholars, feminist theories emerged from political and social movements over the past forty years. As such, the mission of feminist theory is to use knowledge to actively confront and end the oppression of women and related patterns of subordination based on social class, race/ethnicity, age, or sexual orientation. Feminist theorizing has contributed to political action regarding gender and race discrimination in wages; divorce laws that disadvantage women; sexual and physical violence against women and children; and reproductive issues, such as abortion rights and the inclusion of contraception in health insurance. Feminist perspectives promote recognition and support for women’s unpaid work; the greater involvement of men in housework and child care; efforts to fund quality day care and paid parental leaves; and transformations in family therapy so that counselors recognize the reality of gender inequality in family life and treat women’s concerns with respect (Goldner 1993).

Conflict and feminist perspectives are sometimes difficult to accept for those in privileged statuses. For some social scientists these perspectives are too political, too value-laden, too tied to advocacy to be valid academic approaches. For some scholars, the categories used in feminist analysis are too vague and ahistorical. For example, patriarchy, posited to exist in all societies from primitive to postindustrial, seems to lose its meaning as an analytic category when it minimizes differences between America in the twenty-first century and ancient Rome, where husbands allegedly had life and death power over women.

Feminists advocating change in the sex/gender system and the family are frequently under fire from conservative media, politicians, religious leaders, and academics (e.g., Blankenhorn [1995] and Popenoe [1993; 1996]). Such critics fear that feminism may have taken women’s rights too far, resulting in harmful effects on marriage and children.

Feminists maintain that these assertions of a negative impact of feminism on the family are biased. Opponents do not acknowledge, for example, that feminists value women’s caregiving in the family. Feminists also argue that there are other explanations for the changes that concern critics. Moreover, from the feminist perspective, championing the traditional nuclear family at
the cost of women’s equality and well-being is unconscionable. Feminists argue that there is more than one effective way to structure family life (Fox and Murry 2000; Stacey 1993).

The Biosocial Perspective

A biosocial perspective on the family, also termed sociobiology or evolutionary psychology, is characterized by “concepts linking psychosocial factors to physiology, genetics, and evolution” (A. Booth, Carver, and Granger 2000, p. 1018). This perspective argues that human anatomy/physiology, genetics, and hormones affect much of human behavior and, more specifically, many family-related behaviors.

Over the past twenty-five years, the biosocial perspective has emerged as a significant theoretical perspective on the family. Researchers have employed a biosocial perspective to examine such family phenomena as sexual bonding, decisions about whether to have children, parenting behavior, parent–child attachment, gender differences in children and adults, sexual development and behavior, courtship and mate selection, and marital stability and quality (A. Booth, Carver, and Granger 2000).

Much of contemporary human behavior is explained by the biosocial perspective as having evolved in ways that enable survival and continuation of the human species. Successful behavior patterns are encoded in the genes, and this evolutionary heritage is transmitted to succeeding generations.1 In the contemporary version of evolutionary theory, it is the survival of one’s genes, termed inclusive fitness (W. Hamilton 1964), rather than the survival of individual descendants that is important. Protective behavior is thought to be oriented to the survival and reproduction of all close kin who carry those genes, not only direct descendants (Dawkins 1976).

The biosocial perspective presumes that certain human behaviors, because they evolved for the purpose of human survival, are both “natural” and difficult to change. It is asserted, for example, that traditional gender roles evolved from patterns shared with our mammalian ancestors that were useful in early hunter-gatherer societies. Gender differences—males allegedly more aggressive than females, and mothers more likely than fathers to be primarily responsible for child care—are seen as anchored in hereditary biology (Rossi 1984; Udry 1994, 2000).

Biosocial explanations are offered for other contemporary family patterns. Research suggests that children are more likely to be abused by non-biologically related parents or caregivers than by biological parents. Non-biological parent figures are less likely to invest money and time in their children’s development and future prospects (Case, Lin, and McLanahan 2000). The biosocial perspective explains this by arguing that parents “naturally” protect the carriers of their genetic material (Gelles and Lancaster 1987).

Sociobiologists are careful to point out that biological predisposition does not mean that a person’s behavior cannot be influenced or changed by social structure. “Nature” (genetics, hormones, and brain function) and “nurture” (culture and social relations) are seen as interacting to produce human attitudes and behavior. As an example, research on testosterone levels in married couples found high levels of the husbands’ testosterone to be associated with poorer marital quality when their role overload was high, but with better marital quality when role overload was low. In other words, “testosterone enables positive behavior in some instances and negative behavior in others” (A. Booth, Johnson, and Granger 2005, p. 483).

Psychiatrist Michael Rutter, in his presidential address to the Society for Research in Child Development, noted that “quantitative genetic studies have increasingly . . . found major interplay between genetic and non-genetic [environmental] factors, such that the outcomes cannot sensibly be attributed just to one or the other, because they depend on both” (2002, pp. 1, 2).

Biological theories of human behavior have in the past been used to justify systems of inequality and oppression. As a result, many scholars are concerned

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1 The biosocial perspective has its roots in Charles Darwin’s The Origin of Species (1859). Darwin proposed that species evolve according to the principle of survival of the fittest. Only the strongest, more intelligent, and adaptable members of a species survive to reproduce, a process whereby the entire species is strengthened and prospers over time.
about deterministic interpretations of biological influences. Evolutionary perspectives have been the basis for current criticism of nonreproductive partner relationships and the employment of mothers as contrary to nature (Daly and Wilson 2000). And though he acknowledges that there are many successful stepfamilies and adoptions, sociologist David Popenoe (1994) finds these family forms to be unsupported by our evolutionary heritage. He concludes that "we as a society should be doing more to halt the growth of stepfamilies" (p. 21). It is not surprising that biosocial perspectives have been politically and academically controversial.

Still, social science researchers are doing interesting work from a biosocial perspective. Research has connected higher testosterone levels in men to poorer marital functioning, more extramarital sex, more marital separation, and a greater likelihood of divorce (A. Booth and Dabbs 1993). Husbands and wives with similar and low levels of testosterone are found to have better marital adjustment regarding problem solving and social support (Cohan, Booth, and Granger 2003).

The Utility of Biosocial Perspectives on the Family

An "explosion" of biosocial research on the family is anticipated in the next decade (A. Booth, Carver, and Granger 2000, p. 1018) as social scientists move past an earlier distaste for biological explanations to explore this new paradigm. Family scholars and those who use their research should be careful to avoid interpretations shaped by ideological bias—whether this is a presumption that biology is destiny or a contrary postulate that biosocial perspectives are inherently invalid.

In this text, we explore and appraise the biosocial perspective when discussing gender (Chapter 4), extramarital sex (Chapter 6), child care (Chapter 12), and children's well-being in stepfamilies (Chapter 17).

Studying Families

Ideally, social scientists employ both theory and research in studying families. Theory and research are closely integrated, ideally at least, with theory directing us to

These folks are waiting patiently for medical attention in a neighborhood clinic. How might scholars from different theoretical orientations see this photograph? Family ecologists might remark on the quality of the facilities—or speculate about the family's home and neighborhood—and how this affects family health and relations. Scholars from the family development perspective would likely note that this woman is in the child-rearing stage of the family life cycle. Structure–functionalists would be quick to note the child-raising (and, perhaps, expressive) function(s) that this woman is performing for society. Interactionists would be more inclined to explore the mother's body language. What is she saying nonverbally to the child on her lap? What is he saying to her? Exchange theorists might speculate about this woman's personal power and resources relative to others in her family. Family system theorists might point out that this mother and child are part of a family system. Should one person leave or become seriously and chronically ill, for example, the roles and relationships in the entire family would change and adapt as a result. Conflict theorists would compare this crowded and understaffed clinic for the poor with the better equipped and staffed doctors' offices that provide health care to the middle and upper classes—and conflict theorists would demand change. Feminist theorists might point out that typically it is mothers, not fathers, who are primarily responsible for their children's health—and ask why. The answer from a biosocial perspective would be that women have evolved a stronger nurturing capacity that is hormonally based.

Clicker/Discussion Tip: Ask how many students agree with David Popenoe's assertion that "society should be doing more to halt the growth of stepfamilies" and facilitate discussion around the limitations (and advantages) of the Biosocial Perspective, such as the need to avoid deterministic interpretations.
the topics we should study and the concepts and methods we should use to do so.

The great variation in family forms and the variety of social settings for family life mean that few of us can rely on firsthand experience alone in studying the family. Although we “know” about the family because we have lived in one, our experiential reality—beliefs we have about the family—may not be accurate. We may also be misled by media images and common sense—what everybody “knows.” This agreement reality—what members of a society agree is true—may misrepresent the actual experience of families (Babbie 1992, p. 17).

We turn now to consider the difficulties inherent in studying the family and then to a presentation of various methods used by social scientists. Although imperfect, the methods of scientific inquiry bring us a clearer knowledge of the family than does either personal experience or speculation based on media images. Scientific methods represent a form of agreement reality that sets special standards for the acceptance of statements about the family.

**The Blinders of Personal Experience**

Most people grow up in some form of family and know something about what marriages and families are. Although personal experience provides us with information, it may also act as blinders. We assume that our own family is normal or typical. If you grew up in a large family, for example, in which a grandparent or an aunt or uncle shared your home, you probably assumed (for a short time at least) that everyone had a big family. Perceptions like this are usually outgrown at an early age, but some family styles may be taken for granted or assumed to be universal when they are not. Some families talk and argue loudly, for example, while in other families controversial topics are avoided. The members of your family may spend a lot of time alone, perhaps reading, whereas in other families it may be cause for alarm if a family member—adult or child—is not talking to others around the kitchen table.

Personal experience, then, may make us believe that most people’s family lives are similar to our own when often this is not the case. We may be very committed to the view of family life shaped by our experiences and our own choices.

In looking at marriage and family customs around the world, we can easily perceive the error of assuming that all marriage and family practices are like our own. But not only do common American assumptions about family life not hold true in other places, they also frequently don’t even describe our own society. Lesbian or gay male families, black, Latino, and Asian families; Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, Latter-Day Saints (Mormon), Islamic, Buddhist, and nonreligious families; upper-class, middle-class, and lower-class families; urban and rural families—all represent some differences in family lifestyle. However, the tendency to use the most familiar yardstick for measuring things is a strong one, even among social scientists.

**Scientific Investigation: Removing Blinders**

Seeing beyond our personal experience involves learning what kinds of families other people are experiencing and with what consequences. To do this, we use the scientific method of acquiring knowledge. Science can be defined as “a logical system that bases knowledge on systematic observation, empirical evidence, facts we verify with our senses” (Macionis 2006, p. 15).

The scientific method includes theoretical interpretation of observed data. What explanation best fits the known facts? In turn, theories generate hypotheses or ideas about reality, which are then tested in further research.

Scientific results are cumulative. Over time a particular view of reality will be seen to have more evidence behind it than others. It is well established, for example, that marriage carries many benefits for the individual, the couple, and their children (Waite and Gallagher 2000). It is also well established that the arrival of children is associated with a decline in marital happiness (Twenge, Campbell, and Foster 2003), probably due to the challenges of child rearing and adjustments to the couple’s relationship.

This last is a conclusion that is not so pleasing to hear. But part of being a scientist is having objectivity: “The ideal of objective inquiry is to let the facts speak for themselves and not be colored by the personal values and biases of the researcher. In reality, of course, total neutrality is impossible for anyone” (Macionis 2006, p. 18). But following standard research practices and submitting the results to review by other scientists is likely in the long run to correct the biases of individual researchers. “We must be dedicated to finding the truth, as it is rather than as we think it should be” (p. 18).

Over time our understanding of family phenomena is likely to change as new research is undertaken and new theoretical perspectives developed.

**The Ethics of Research on Families**

Exploring the lives of families as social science researchers do carries responsibility with it. To address past abuses, most researchers now must have their research plans reviewed by a special board of experts and community representatives called an institutional review board (IRB). In fact, no federally funded research can proceed...
without an IRB review, and most institutions require one for all research on human subjects (P. Cohen 2007a).

The IRB scrutinizes each research proposal for adherence to professional ethical standards for the protection of human subjects. These standards include informed consent (the research participants must be apprised of the nature of the research and then give their consent); lack of coercion; protection from harm; confidentiality of data and identities; compensation of participants for their time, risk, and expenses; and eventual sharing of research results with participants and other appropriate audiences.

IRBs do not focus on evaluating the research topic or methodology—other than to make sure that the research is scientifically sound enough to merit participation of the human subjects. Also, samples must be selected “equitably.” Where feasible, research should be designed to provide medical knowledge about various population subgroups (University of Nebraska 2006). (A Chapter 3 box, “Studying Families and Ethnicity,” discusses the issue of racial/ethnic bias in research.)

Methods of Data Collection

In studying the family, we rely on data gathered systematically from many sources through techniques of scientific investigation. These techniques—surveys, laboratory observation and experiments, naturalistic observation, case studies, longitudinal studies, and historical and cross-cultural data—will be referred to throughout this text, so we will briefly describe them now.

Surveys  Surveys are part of our everyday experience. When conducting scientific surveys, researchers engage in face-to-face or telephone interviews or distribute questionnaires. Questions are often structured so that after a statement (such as “I like to go places with my partner”), the respondent has answers from which to choose. Researchers spend much energy and time wording such closed-ended questions so that, as much as possible, all respondents will interpret questions in the same way. It is also important to be attentive to the wording of questions because choice of words can influence responses considerably. Respondents tend to be much more favorable to “assistance to the poor” for example, than to “welfare” (Babbie 2007, p. 251).

Survey questions may also be open-ended. For example, the question might be “How do you feel about going places with your partner?” or “Tell me about going places with your partner.” Many social scientists believe that open-ended questions are better for finding out what people really feel or believe than are questions that offer only a limited set of responses to choose from.

Once the surveys are completed, survey responses are tallied and analyzed, usually with computerized coding and statistical programs. Next the researcher draws conclusions about respondents' attitudes and behavior. Finally, the researcher must decide to whom the conclusions are applicable. Do the results apply only to those who are in the sample studied or more generally to other people similar to the research participants?

In order that their conclusions may be generalized (applied to people other than those directly questioned), survey researchers do their best to ensure that their respondents constitute a representative sample of the people they intend to draw conclusions about. Popular magazine surveys, for example, are seldom representative of the total American public. Results from a survey in which all respondents are young, white, middle-class college students cannot be considered representative of Americans in general. So researchers and political pollsters may use random samples, in which households or individuals are randomly selected from a comprehensive list (see Babbie 2007). A random sample is considered representative of the population from which it is drawn. A national random sample of approximately 1,500 people may validly represent the U.S. population.

Survey research has certain advantages over other inquiry techniques. The main advantage is uniformity. Also, surveys are a relatively efficient means of gathering large amounts of information. Plus, data sets already collected and archived may be a rich resource for other doing research on the family.

Surveys have disadvantages, too. Because they ask uniform or standardized questions, surveys may miss points that respondents would consider important. Surveys neither tell us about the context in which a question is answered nor guarantee that in a real-life situation a person will act in a manner consistent with the answer given to the interviewer.

Also, respondents have a tendency to say what they think they should say. If asked whether or how often physical abuse occurs in the home, for example, those who engage in family violence might be reluctant to say so. Respondents might answer differently depending on the sex, age, race, and lifestyle of the person interviewing them or distributing the written questionnaire. A forty-five-year-old male asked about his experience with sexual dysfunction may be expected to reply differently to a male of twenty than he would to one of sixty—or to a female researcher of any age.

A further disadvantage of surveys is the tendency of respondents to forget the past or to reinterpret what happened in the past. Because of this tendency, social scientists recognize the value of longitudinal studies—studies in which the same group of respondents is surveyed or interviewed intermittently over a period of years.
Laboratory Observation and Experiments  Because of the relative ease of conducting surveys, the flexibility of the format, and the availability of samples (even a classroom sample may provide some useful information), surveys have been a primary source of information about family living. Other techniques are also used, however.

In laboratory observation or an experiment, behaviors are carefully monitored or measured under controlled conditions. Families may be asked to discuss a hypothetical case or problem or to play a game while their behavior is observed and recorded. Later those data can be analyzed to assess the family’s interaction style and the nature of their relationships. Laboratory methods are useful in measuring physiological changes associated with anger, fear, sexual response, or behavior that is difficult to report verbally.

In an experiment, subjects from a pool of similar participants will be randomly assigned to groups (experimental and control groups) that will be given different experiences (treatments). Families whose child is undergoing a bone-marrow transplant may be asked to participate in an experiment to determine how they may best be helped to cope with the situation. One group of families may be assigned to a support group in which the expression of feelings, even negative ones, is encouraged (Experimental Group 1). Another set of families may be assigned to a group in which the emphasis is on providing information about transplantation and maintaining a positive, cheerful outlook (Experimental Group 2). A third group of families may receive no special intervention (Control Group). If at the conclusion of the experiment the groups differ in attitudes and behavior according to some measures of coping behavior, mental health, and family functioning, then the outcome is presumed to be a result of the experimental treatment. Put another way, because no other differences are presumed to exist among the randomly assigned groups, the results of the experiment provide evidence of the effects of the therapeutic interventions.

A true experiment has these features of random assignment and experimental manipulation of the important variable. Laboratory observation, on the other hand, simply means that behavior is observed in a laboratory setting, but it does not involve random assignment or experimental manipulation of a variable.

The experiment just described takes place in a field (real-life) setting, but experiments are often conducted in a laboratory setting because researchers have more control over what will happen. They have more chance to plan the activities, measure the results, determine who is involved, and eliminate outside influences.
Experiments, whether in real life or a laboratory, have both advantages and disadvantages. One advantage of experiments is that social scientists may observe human behavior directly, rather than depending on what respondents tell them. The experimenter may control the experience of the subjects and may ensure, to some extent, the initial similarity of subjects in the two groups. A disadvantage of this research technique is that the behaviors being observed often take place in an artificial situation, and whether an artificial situation is analogous to real life is always debatable. A family asked to solve a hypothetical problem through group discussion may behave differently in a formal laboratory experiment than they would at home around the kitchen table discussing a real problem.

Another limitation of experimental research is that the subject pool is often drawn from college classrooms and therefore is not representative of the general population. Sometimes, "volunteers" must participate in an experiment for class credit; in such cases, the authenticity of results is often in question.

**Naturalistic Observation** Many aspects of human behavior and interaction don't lend themselves to experiment, so social scientists use another technique in an attempt to overcome artificiality. In naturalistic observation, the researcher lives with a family or social group or spends extensive time with family or group members, carefully recording their activities, conversations, gestures, and other aspects of everyday life. The researcher attempts to discern family relationships and communication patterns and to draw implications and conclusions for understanding family behavior in general.

The principal advantage of naturalistic observation is that it allows us to view family behavior as it actually happens in its own natural—as opposed to artificial—setting. The most significant disadvantage of this tool is that findings and conclusions may be highly subjective. That is, what is recorded, analyzed, and assumed to be accurate depends on what one or a few observers think is significant. Another drawback to naturalistic observation is that it requires enormous amounts of time to observe only a few families. And these families may not be representative of family living in general. Perhaps because of these disadvantages, relatively few studies use this technique.

Still, Fred Davis's (1991) observational study of the interaction of families of polio victims, first published in 1963, remains an important piece of observational research that provides useful insights into the dynamics of families in crisis. It may become even more relevant now that medical science has enabled more children to survive serious illness; they and their families will live with crisis and chronic disease for an extended period. This study is a good example of the interactionist theoretical perspective, which is often the framework for naturalistic observation.

**Clinicians' Case Studies** A fourth way that we get information about families is from case studies compiled by clinicians—psychologists, psychiatrists, marriage counselors, and social workers—who counsel people with marital and family problems. As they see individuals, couples, or whole families over a period of time, these counselors become acquainted with communication patterns and other interactions within families. Clinicians offer us knowledge about family behavior and attitudes by describing cases or by telling us about their conclusions based on a series of cases.

The advantages of case studies are the vivid detail and realistic flavor that enable us to experience vicariously the family life of others. The insights of clinicians may be helpful. But case studies also have important weaknesses. There is always a subjective or personal element in the way the clinician views the family. Inevitably, any one person has a limited viewpoint. Clinicians' professional training may lead them to overemphasize or underemphasize certain aspects of family life or to mistake cultural patterns for psychological truths. Psychiatrists, for example, used to assume that the career interests of women were abnormal and caused the development of marital and sexual problems (Chesler 2005).

Another potential bias of case studies is that people who present themselves for counseling may differ in important ways from those who do not. Most obviously, they may have more problems. For example, throughout the 1950s psychiatrists reported that gays in therapy had many emotional difficulties. Subsequent studies of gay males not in therapy concluded that gays were no more likely to have mental health problems than were heterosexuals (American Psychological Association 2007).

**Longitudinal Studies** Longitudinal studies provide long-term information about individuals or groups, as researchers conduct follow-up investigations (usually by means of interviews or questionnaires) for some years after an initial study. Observational or experimental studies could be repeated, but this is rarely done.

A good example of longitudinal research is the ongoing study by Booth, White, and colleagues. In 1980 they interviewed a group of adults who were married at the time, and then reinterviewed them three more times during the 1980s and 1990s. The researchers traced the demographic and relationship patterns affecting marital quality and stability, divorce, and remarriage. In 1992 and 1995, the now-grown children of these marriages were interviewed, and information about their
educational and occupational attainment and family status was added to the study (A. Booth Johnson, White, and Edwards 1985; L. White and Keith 1990; Amato and Booth 1997; and many other articles).

A difficulty encountered in longitudinal studies, besides cost, is the frequent loss of subjects due to death, relocation, or their loss of interest. Social change occurring over a long period of time may make it difficult to ascertain what, precisely, has influenced family change. Yet cross-sectional data (one-time comparison of different groups) cannot show change in the same individuals over time.

**Historical and Cross-Cultural Data**  Analyzing historical records is a research approach that came to attention beginning in the 1960s with some interesting work by social historians in France (Ariès 1962) and England (Laslett 1971). Whether done by historians or other social scientists, historical research continues to be an important method of family research.

Zelizer's (1985) study of insurance documents and other historical materials conveys the changing status of the child from economic to emotional asset. Historical studies of marriage and divorce in the United States give us a picture of the past, which is not always as we thought it was in terms of stability and harmony (Cott 2000; Hartog 2000).

Drawbacks of historical research are the unevenness and unavailability of data. Scholars can use only those data which were preserved and to which they have access. Typically, the upper classes, who had both the leisure and resources to record their activities, are overrepresented. But historical scholars have been very creative. Hanawalt (1986) constructed a rich picture of the medieval family through an examination of death records.

Demographic and economic data and legal records are especially useful for analyses of the family institution. Scholars are on less-solid footing in describing intimate family matters because they must rely on materials such as individuals’ diaries, which may not be representative of the period. More recently, however, the use of these personal materials has been defended, and the results have challenged earlier historians’ assumptions that premodern family life lacked emotional intimacy (Osmen 2001).

Sociologists, especially those who place more emphasis on cross-cultural comparison than we are able to do in this text, continue to look to anthropological fieldwork as well as survey data for information on family life and structure in societies in both developed and developing nations.

**The Application of Scientific Techniques**  All research tools represent a compromise. Each has its special strengths and weaknesses. However, the strengths of one research tool may make up for the weaknesses of another. To get around the drawbacks of each technique, social scientists may combine two or more tools in their research.

Ideally, a number of scientists examine one topic by several different methods. The scientific conclusions in this text result from many studies and from various and complementary research tools. Despite the drawbacks and occasional blinders, the total body of information available from sociological, psychological, and counseling literature provides a reasonably accurate portrayal of marriage and family life today.

**Summary**

- Different theoretical perspectives—family ecology, family development, structure—functional, interactionist, exchange, family systems, conflict, feminist, and biosocial—illuminate various features of families and provide a foundation for research.

- The structure—functional perspective draws attention to functions performed by the family. Cross-cultural comparisons show us that assumptions about family structure, family functions, and family ways of courtship, marriage, gender, parenting, and kinship based on our own culture are limited. Family life is quite diverse across cultures.

- How do we know what families are like? We can call upon personal experience for the beginning of an answer to this question. But everyone’s personal experience is limited. Scientific investigation—with its ideal of objectivity, cumulative results, and various methodological techniques for gathering empirical data—is designed to provide a more effective and accurate way of gathering knowledge about the family.

- Methodologies of data collection include surveys, laboratory observation and experiments, naturalistic observation, clinicians’ case studies, longitudinal studies, and historical and cross-cultural data.

- Researchers need to be guided by professional standards and ethical principles of protection for research participants.
Questions for Review and Reflection

1. Choose one of the theoretical perspectives on the family, and discuss how you might use it to understand something about life in your family.

2. Choose a magazine photo, and analyze its content from a structure–functional perspective. (Hint: Together the people in the photo may constitute the group under analysis, with each person meeting certain of the group’s needs, or functions.) Then analyze the photo from another theoretical perspective. How do your insights differ depending on which theoretical perspective is used?

3. Why is the family a major social institution? Does your family fulfill each of the family functions identified in the text? How?

4. Review the techniques of scientific investigation, and discuss why science is often considered a better way to gain knowledge than is personal experience alone. When might this not be the case?

5. **Policy Question.** What aspect of family life would it be helpful for policy makers to know more about as they make law and design social programs? How might this topic be researched? Is it controversial?

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**Key Terms**

agreement reality 38  
biosocial perspective 36  
boundary ambiguity 34  
case study 41  
conflict perspective 35  
developmental task 27  
emerging adulthood 28  
equilibrium 34  
evolutionary heritage 36  
exchange balance 33  
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“on-time” transition 27  
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