Chapter 9. Marriage and Family

Image 9.1. Detail from mural in Open Hearth Park, Sydney, NS. Once upon a time, any definition of family automatically included children. Is that still true today? Photo Courtesy of constancemc/Flickr
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Introduction to Marriage and Family

Christina and James met in college and dated for more than five years. For the past two years, they have been living together in a condo they purchased jointly. While Christina and James were confident in their decision to enter into a commitment (such as a 20-year mortgage), they are unsure if they want to enter marriage. The couple had many discussions and decided that marriage just did not seem necessary. Was it not only a piece of paper? Didn’t half of all marriages end in divorce?

Neither Christina nor James had seen much success with marriage while growing up. Christina was raised by a single mother. Her parents never married, and her father had little contact with the family. Christina and her mother lived with her maternal grandmother, who often served as a surrogate parent. James grew up in a two-parent household until age seven, when his parents divorced. He lived with his mother for a few years, and then later with his mother and her boyfriend. James remained close with his father who remarried and had a baby with his new wife.

Christina and James are now thinking about having children, and the subject of marriage has resurfaced. Christina likes the idea of children growing up in a traditional family. James is concerned about possible marital problems down the road and negative consequences for the children. When they shared these concerns with their parents, James’s mom thought the couple should get married. Despite having been divorced and having a live-in boyfriend of 15 years, she believes that children are better off when their parents are married. Christina’s mom believes that the couple should do whatever they want but adds that it would “be nice” if they wed. Christina and James’s friends told them, married or not married, they would still be a family.

Christina and James are like many young couples today, particularly those in urban areas (Useem, 2007). Statistics Canada (2012) reports that the number of unmarried, common-
law couples grew by 35% between 2001 and 2011, for a total of 16.7% of all Canadian families in Canada. Cohabitating, but unwed, couples account for 16.7% of all families in Canada. Some may never choose to wed (Jayson, 2008). With fewer couples marrying, the traditional Canadian family structure is less common.

Nevertheless, although the percentage of traditional married couples has declined as a proportion of all families, at 67% of all families, it is still by far the common family structure.

**What Is Marriage? What Is a Family?**

Marriage and family are key social structures in most societies. While the two institutions have historically been closely linked in Canada, their connection is becoming more complex. The relationship between marriage and family is often taken for granted, but with the increasing diversity of family forms, their relationship needs to be reexamined.

What is marriage? Not even sociologists are able to agree on a single meaning. This book defines marriage as a legally recognized social contract between two people, traditionally based on a sexual relationship, and implying permanence. An inclusive definition must consider variations, such as whether a formal legal union is required (think of common-law marriage and its equivalents), or whether more than two people can be involved (consider polygamy). Other variations on the definition of marriage might include whether spouses are of opposite or same sex, and whether one traditional expectations of marriage -- to produce children-- is included today.

Sociologists study the relationship between the institution of marriage and the institution of family because, historically, marriages create a family, and families are the most basic unit of society. Both marriage and family create status roles that are sanctioned by society.
So what is a family? A husband, a wife, and two children—maybe even a pet—served as the model for the traditional Canadian family for most of the 20th century. But what about other family forms, such as a single-parent household or a gay couple without children? Should they be considered families?

The question of what constitutes a family is debated in family sociology, as well as in politics and religion. Social conservatives tend to define the family in terms of a “traditional” nuclear family structure with each family member filling a certain role (like father, mother, or child). Sociologists, on the other hand, tend to define family more in terms of the way members relate to one another.

This book defines family as a socially recognized group joined by blood relations, marriage, or adoption that

- forms an emotional connection and
- serves as an economic unit of society.

Sociologists also identify different types of families based on how they form. A family of orientation refers to the family into which a person is born. A family of procreation describes one that is formed through marriage. These distinctions have cultural significance related to issues of lineage.

Family is a social form that comes into existence around five different contents or interests:

- sexual activity,
- economic cooperation,
- reproduction,
- socialization of children, and
- emotional support.
The types of family form vary: nuclear families, polygamous families, extended families, same-sex parent families, single-parent families, blended families, and zero-child families, etc. However, the family forms aren’t random; rather, these forms are determined by cultural traditions, social structures, economic pressures, and historical transformations.

**Making Connections: How Do Working Moms Impact Society?**

What constitutes a “typical family” in Canada has changed tremendously over the past decades. One of the most notable changes has been the increasing number of mothers who work outside the home. Earlier in 20th century Canada, most family households consisted of one parent working outside the home and the other being the primary child care provider. Because of traditional gender roles and family structures, this was typically a working father and a stay-at-home mom. Research shows that in 1951 only 24% of all women worked outside the home (Li, 1996). In 2009, 58.3% of all women did, and 64.4% of women with children younger than three years of age were employed (Statistics Canada, 2011).

Sociologists interested in this topic might approach it from a variety of angles. One might be interested in its impact on child development; another sociologist may explore its effect on family income; while a third sociologist might examine how other social institutions have responded to this shift in society.

A sociologist studying the impact of working mothers on child development might ask questions about children raised in child care settings outside the home. How is a child socialized differently when raised largely by a child care provider rather than a parent? Do early experiences in a school-like child care setting lead to improved academic performance later in life? How does a child with two working parents perceive gender roles compared to a child raised with a stay-at-home parent?

An **economic perspective. Why do so many households today have dual incomes? Has this changed the income of families substantially? How do women’s dual roles in the household and in the wider economy affect their occupational achievements and ability to participate on an equal basis with men in the workforce? What impact does the**
Family forms also are subject to intense moral and political debate about the definition of the family, the “decline of the family,” or policy options to best support children. In these debates, sociology searches for the factual knowledge needed to make evidence-based decisions on political and moral issues.

Another sociologist might be interested in the increase in working mothers from an

As these examples show, sociologists study many real-world topics. Their research often influences social policies and political issues. Results from sociological studies might play a role in developing federal policies like the Employment Insurance maternity and parental benefits program. They might help a group striving to reduce social stigmas placed on stay-at-home dads. They might help governments determine how to best allocate funding for education.

Many European countries like Sweden have substantial family support policies, such as a full year of parental leave at 80% of wages when a child is born, and heavily subsidized, high-quality daycare and preschool programs. Sociologists might be interested in studying whether the benefits of the Swedish system—in terms of children’s well-being, lower family poverty, and gender equality—outweigh the drawbacks of higher Swedish tax rates.
Perceptions of the family

Symbolic interactionist theories say that families are groups in which participants view themselves as family members and act accordingly. Families are groups in which people come together to form a strong primary group connection, maintaining emotional ties to one another over a long period of time. Such families could potentially include groups of close friends as family. However, the way family groupings view themselves is not independent of the wider social forces.

North Americans are divided when it comes to determining what does and what does not constitute a family. In a 2010 survey conducted by Ipsos Reid, participants were asked what they believed constituted a family unit. 80% of respondents agreed that a husband, wife, and children constitute a family. 66% stated that a common-law couple with children still constitutes a family. The numbers drop for less traditional structures: a single mother and children (55%), a single father and children (54%), grandparents raising children (50%), common-law or married couples without children (46%), gay male couples with children (45%) (Postmedia News, 2010). This survey revealed that children tend to be the key indicator in establishing “family” status: the percentage of individuals who agreed that unmarried couples constitute a family nearly doubled when children were added.

Another study also revealed that 60% of North Americans agreed that if you consider yourself a family, you are a family (a concept that reinforces an interactionist perspective) (Powell et al., 2010). Canadian statistics are based on the more inclusive definition of “census families.” Statistics Canada defines a census family as “composed of a married or common-law couple, with or without children, or of a lone parent living with at least one child in the same dwelling. Couples can be of the opposite sex or of the same sex” (Statistics Canada, 2012).
Sociologists argue that the general concept of family is more diverse and less structured than in years past. Society has given more leeway to the design of a family — making room for what works for its members (Jayson, 2010).

Family is a subjective concept, but it is a fact that family (however defined) is very important to North Americans. In a 2010 survey by Pew Research Center in Washington, D.C., 76% of adults surveyed stated that family is “the most important” element of their life — just 1% said it was “not important” (Pew Research Center, 2010). It is also very important to society. American President Ronald Reagan notably stated, “The family has always been the cornerstone of American society. Our families nurture, preserve, and pass on to each succeeding generation the values we share and cherish, values that are the foundation of our freedoms” (Lee, 2009). The dark side of this importance can also be seen in Reagan’s successful use of “family values” rhetoric to attack welfare mothers. His infamous “welfare queen” story about a Black single mother in Chicago, who supposedly defrauded the government of $150,000 in welfare payments, was a complete fabrication that nevertheless “worked” politically because of widespread social anxieties about the decline of the family.

While the design of the family may have changed in recent years, the fundamentals of emotional closeness and support are still present. Most respondents to the Pew survey stated that their family today is at least as close (45%) or closer (40%) than the family with which they grew up (Pew Research Center, 2010).

Alongside the debate surrounding what constitutes a family is the question of what North Americans believe constitutes a marriage. Many religious and social conservatives believe that marriage can only exist between man and a woman, citing religious scripture and the basics of human reproduction as support. Prime Minister Stephen Harper stated, “I have no difficulty with the recognition of civil unions for nontraditional relationships but I
believe in law we should protect the traditional definition of marriage” (*Globe and Mail*, 2010). Social liberals and progressives, on the other hand, believe that marriage can exist
between two consenting and that it is discriminatory to deny such a couple the civil, social, and economic benefits of marriage.

Making Connections: The Evolution of Television Families

Whether you grew up watching the Cleavers, the Waltons, the Huxtables, or the Simpsons, most of the famous families in television sitcoms included a father, a mother, and children living under the same roof. The 1960s was the height of the suburban American nuclear family on television with shows such as The Donna Reed Show and Father Knows Best. While some shows of this era portrayed single parents (My Three Sons and Bonanza, for instance), the single status almost always resulted from being widowed, not divorced or unwed.

Although family dynamics in real North American homes were changing, the expectations for families portrayed on television were not. North America’s first reality show, An American Family (which aired on PBS in 1973) chronicled Bill and Pat Loud and their children as a “typical” American family. Cameras documented the typical coming and going of daily family life. During the series, the oldest son, Lance, announced to the family that he was gay, and at the series’ conclusion, Bill and Pat decided to divorce. Although the Loud’s union was among the 30% of marriages that ended in divorce in 1973, the family was featured on the cover of the March 12 issue of Newsweek with the title “The Broken Family” (Ruoff, 2002).

Less traditional family structures in sitcoms gained popularity in the 1980s with shows such as Diff ’rent Strokes (a widowed man with two adopted African American sons) and One Day at a Time (a divorced woman with two teenage daughters). Still, traditional families such as those in Family Ties and The Cosby Show dominated the ratings. The late 1980s and the 1990s saw the introduction of the dysfunctional family. Shows such as Roseanne, Married with Children, and The Simpsons portrayed traditional nuclear families, but in a much less flattering light than those from the 1960s (Museum of Broadcast Communications, 2011).

Over the past 10 years, the nontraditional family has become more common in television. While most situation comedies focus on single men and women without
children, those that do portray families often stray from the classic structure: they include unmarried and divorced parents, adopted children, gay couples, and multigenerational households. Even those that do feature traditional family structures may show less traditional characters in supporting roles, such as the brothers in the highly rated shows Everybody Loves Raymond and Two and Half Men. Even popular children’s programs as Disney’s Hannah Montana and The Suite Life of Zack & Cody feature single parents.

In 2009, ABC premiered an intensely nontraditional family with the broadcast of Modern Family. The show follows an extended family that includes a divorced and remarried father with one stepchild, and his biological adult children — one of who is in a traditional two-parent household, and the other who is a gay man in a committed relationship raising an adopted daughter. While this dynamic may be more complicated than the typical “modern” family, its elements may resonate with many viewers. “The families on the shows aren’t as idealistic, but they remain relatable,” states television critic Maureen Ryan. “The most successful shows, comedies especially, have families that you can look at and see parts of your family in them” (Respers France, 2010).

Variations in Family Life
The combination of husband, wife, and children that 80% of Canadians believes constitutes a family is not representative of most Canadian families. According to 2011 census data, only 31.9% of all census families consisted of a married couple with children, down from 37.4% in 2001. 63% of children under age 14 live in a household with two married parents. This is a decrease from almost 70% in 1981 (Statistics Canada, 2012).

This two-parent family structure is known as a nuclear family. Recent years have seen a rise in variations of the nuclear family with the parents not being married. The proportion of children aged 14 and under who live with two unmarried cohabiting parents increased from 12.8% in 2001 to 16.3% in 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2012).
Single Parents

Single-parent households are also more common. In 2011, 19.3% of children aged 14 and under lived with a single parent only, up slightly from 18% in 2001. Of that 19.3%, 82% live with their mother (Statistics Canada, 2012).

Stepparents are an additional family element in two-parent homes. A stepfamily is defined as “a couple family in which at least one child is the biological or adopted child of only one married spouse or common-law partner and whose birth or adoption preceded the current relationship” (Statistics Canada, 2012). Among children living in two parent households, 10% live with a biological or adoptive parent and a stepparent (Statistics Canada, 2012).

In some family structures, a parent is not present at all. In 2010, 106,000 children (1.8% of all children) lived with a guardian who was neither their biological nor adoptive parent. Of these children, 28% lived with grandparents, 44% lived with other relatives, and 28% lived with non-relatives or foster parents. If we also include families in which both parents and grandparents are present (about 4.8% of all census families with children under the age of 14 years), this family structure is referred to as the extended family, and may include aunts, uncles, and cousins living in the same home. Foster children account for about 0.5% of all children in private households.

Changes in the traditional family structure raise questions about how such societal shifts affect children. Research, mostly from American sources, has shown that children living in homes with both parents grow up with more financial and educational advantages than children who are raised in single-parent homes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The Canadian data is not so clear. We will have to wait for more research to be published from sources such as the National Longitudinal Survey to see whether there is more conclusive evidence concerning the relative advantages of dual- and single-parent family settings.
Nevertheless, what the data show is that the key factors in children’s quality of life are the educational levels and economic condition of the family, not whether children’s parents are married, common-law, or single. For example, young children in low-income families are more likely to have vocabulary problems, and young children in higher-income families have more opportunities to participate in recreational activities (Human Resources Development Canada, 2003). This is a matter related more to public policy decisions concerning the level of financial support and care services (like public child care) provided to families than different family structures. In Sweden, the government provides generous paid parental leave after the birth of a child, free health care, temporary paid parental leave for parents with sick children, high-quality subsidized daycare, and substantial direct child-benefit payments for each child. Indicators of child well-being (literacy, levels of child poverty, rates of suicide, etc.) score very high regardless of the difference between single- and dual-parent family structures (Houseknecht and Sastry, 1996).

**Cohabitation**

Living together before or instead of marriage is a growing option. Cohabitation, living together in a sexual relationship without being married, was practised by an estimated 1.6 million people (16.7% of all census families) in 2011, which shows an increase of 13.9% since 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2012). This surge in cohabitation is likely due to the decrease in social stigma pertaining to the practice. Canada, 2012).

Cohabitating couples may choose to live together to spend more time together or to save money on living costs. Many couples view cohabitation as a “trial run” for marriage. Today, approximately 28% of men and women cohabitated before their first marriage. By comparison, 18% of men and 23% of women married without ever cohabitating (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The clear majority of cohabitating relationships eventually result
in marriage; only 15% of men and women cohabitate only and do not marry. About one-half of cohabitators transition into marriage within three years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

While couples may use this time to “work out the kinks” of a relationship before they wed, the most recent research has found that cohabitation has little effect on the success of a marriage. Those who do not cohabitate before marriage have slightly better rates of remaining married for more than 10 years (Jayson, 2010).

Image 9.2. As shown by these population pyramids of marital status, more young people are choosing to delay or opt out of marriage. (Milan, Anne. 2013; Population pyramids courtesy of Statistics Canada)
Same-Sex Couples
The number of same-sex couples has grown significantly in the past decade. In Canada, same-sex couples make up 0.8% of all couples. The Civil Marriage Act (Bill C-38) legalized same sex marriage in Canada on July 20, 2005. Some provinces and territories had already adopted legal same-sex marriage, beginning with Ontario in June 2003. In 2011, Statistics Canada reported 64,575 same-sex couple households in Canada, up by 42% from 2006. Of these, about three in ten were same-sex married couples compared to 16.5% in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2012). These increases are a result of more coupling, the change in the marriage laws, growing social acceptance of homosexuality, and a subsequent increase in willingness to report it.

While there is some concern from socially conservative groups (especially in the United States) regarding the well-being of children who grow up in same-sex households, research reports that same-sex parents are as effective as opposite-sex parents. In an analysis of 81 parenting studies, sociologists found no quantifiable data to support the notion that opposite-sex parenting is any better than same-sex parenting. Children of lesbian couples, however, were shown to have slightly lower rates of behavioural problems and higher rates of self-esteem (Biblarz and Stacey, 2010).

Staying Single
Gay or straight, a new option for many Canadians is simply to stay single. In 2011, about one-fifth of all individuals over the age of 15 did not live in a couple or family (Statistics Canada, 2012). Never-married individuals accounted for 73.1% of young adults in the 25 to 29 age bracket, up from 26% in 1981 (Milan, 2013). More young men in this age bracket are single than young women — 78.8% to 67.4% — reflecting the tendency for men to marry at an older age and to marry women younger than themselves (Milan, 2013).
Although both single men and single women report social pressure to get married, women are subject to greater scrutiny. Single women are often portrayed as unhappy “spinsters” or “old maids” who cannot find a man to marry them. Single men, on the other hand, are typically portrayed as lifetime bachelors who cannot settle down or simply “have not found the right girl.” Single women report feeling insecure and displaced in their families when their single status is disparaged (Roberts, 2007). However, single women older than 35 report feeling secure and happy with their unmarried status, as many women in this category have found success in their education and careers. In general, women feel more independent and more prepared to live a large portion of their adult lives without a spouse or domestic partner than they did in the 1960s (Roberts, 2007).

The decision to marry or not to marry can be based a variety of factors including religion and cultural expectations.

Asian North Americans are the most likely to marry while Black North Americans are the least likely to marry (Venugopal, 2011). Additionally, individuals who place no value on religion are more likely to be unmarried than those who place a high value on religion. For Black women, however, the importance of religion made no difference in marital status (Bakalar, 2010). In general, being single is not a rejection of marriage; rather, it is a lifestyle that does not necessarily include marriage. By age 40, according to census figures, 20% of women and 14% of men will have never married (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

**Theoretical Perspectives on Marriage and Family**

Sociologists study families on both the macro- and micro-level to determine how families function. Sociologists may use a variety of theoretical perspectives to explain events that occur within and outside of the family.
Functionalism

Functionalists uphold the notion that families are an important social institution that they play a key role in stabilizing society. Family members take on status roles in a marriage or family. The family — and its members — perform certain functions that facilitate the prosperity and development of society.

Anthropologist George Murdock defined the family narrowly as “a social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation, and reproduction,” which “includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children” (Murdock, 1949). Murdock conducted a survey of 250 societies and determined that there are four universal residual functions of the family: sexual, reproductive, educational, and economic (Lee, 1985). In each society, although the structure of the family varies, the family performs these four functions.

According to Murdock, the family (which for him includes the state of marriage) regulates sexual relations between individuals. He does not deny the existence or impact of premarital or extramarital sex, but states that the family offers a socially legitimate sexual outlet for adults (Lee, 1985). Although societies differ greatly to the degree that they place limitations on sexual behaviour, all societies have norms governing sexual behavior. The function of the family is to establish the stated norms around sexual gratification.

This outlet for legitimate sexual relations gives way to reproduction, which is a necessary part of ensuring the survival of society. Each society needs to replace the older people with new generations of young people. Again, the institution of the family provides a socially legitimate and regulated form in which children are produced and given recognized status in society. Societies which practice celibacy, like the religious community of the Shakers were dysfunctional as they were unable to maintain sufficient
population to remain viable. By the 1920s there were only 12 Shaker communities left in the United States.

Once children are produced, the family plays a vital role in training them for adult life. As the primary agent of socialization, the family teaches young children the ways of thinking and behaving that follow social and cultural norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes. Parents teach their children manners and civility. A well-mannered child (presumably) reflects a well-mannered parent. In most societies, the family unit is responsible for establishing the emotional security and sense of personal self-worth of its members, which begins in childhood. When families fail to do this they are seen as dysfunctional.

Parents also teach children gender roles. Gender roles are an important part of the economic function of a family. According to functionalists, the differentiation of the roles based on sex ensures that families are well-balanced and coordinated. Each family member is seen as performing a specific role and function to maintain the functioning of the family. Each family member has a socially recognized role that reduces internal competition for status within the family, and ambiguity about the status of the family in the external community.

When family members move outside of these roles, the family is thrown out of balance and must recalibrate to function properly. For example, if the father assumes an expressive role, such as providing daytime care for the children, the mother must take on an instrumental role such as gaining paid employment outside of the home in order for the family to maintain balance and function.

The fourth function of the family Murdock identified is economic. The family is understood as a primary economic unit where the economic well-being of family members is provided. In premodern family forms, the extended family itself is the basis of the economy. As a unit it produces the basic needs of its members including food,
shelter, health care, and comfort in general. In modern society, some of these economic functions, like production and health care, are taken over by other social institutions, but the family remains the principle unit of consumption. Family members coordinate their incomes to provide economically for the rest of the family.

**Critical Sociology**

Critical sociologists point out that North American families are defined as private entities, the consequence of which (historically) has been to see family matters as issues concerning only those within the family. Serious issues including domestic violence and child abuse, inequality between the sexes, the right to dispose of family property equally, and so on, have been historically treated as being outside of state, legal, or police jurisdiction. The feminist slogan of the 1960s and 1970s — “the personal is the political” — indicates how feminists began to draw attention to the broad social or public implications of matters long considered private or inconsequential. As women’s roles had long been relegated to the private sphere, issues of power that affected their lives most directly were largely invisible.

Critical sociology highlights the political-economic context of the inequalities of power in family life. The family is often not a haven but rather an arena where the effects of societal power struggles are felt. This exercise of power often entails the differentiation and performance of family status roles. *Why* are women expected to perform the “expressive” roles in the family while the men perform “instrumental” roles, and what are the implications of this division of labour? Critical sociologists therefore study conflicts as simple as the enforcement of rules from parent to child, or more serious issues such as domestic violence (spousal and child), sexual assault, marital rape, and incest, as products of power structures in broader society.
The political and economic context is also key to understanding changes in the structure of the family over the 20th and 21st centuries. The debate between functionalist and critical sociologists on the rise of non-nuclear family forms is an example. Since the 1950s, the functionalist approach to the family has emphasized the importance of the nuclear family — a married man and woman in a socially approved sexual relationship with at least one child — as the basic unit of an orderly and functional society. Although only 39% of families conformed to this model in 2006, in functionalist approaches, it often operates as a model of the normal family, with the implication that non-normal family forms lead to a variety of society-wide dysfunctions.

On the other hand, critical perspectives emphasize that the diversity of family forms does not indicate the “decline of the family” (i.e., of the ideal of the nuclear family) so much as the diverse response of the family form to the tensions of gender inequality and historical changes in the economy and society. The nuclear family should be not be seen as a normative model for how families should be, and more as an historical anomaly that reflected the specific social and economic conditions of the two decades following World War II.

**Symbolic Interactionism**

Interactionists view the world in terms of symbols and the meanings assigned to them (LaRossa and Reitzes, 1993). The family itself is a symbol. To some, it is a father, mother, and children; to others, it is any union that involves respect and compassion. Interactionists stress that family is not an objective, concrete reality. Like other social phenomena, it is a social construct that is subject to the ebb and flow of social norms and ever-changing meanings.

Consider the meaning of other elements of family: “parent” was a symbol of a biological and emotional connection to a child. With more parent-child relationships developing
through adoption, remarriage, or change in guardianship, the word “parent” today is less likely to be associated with a biological connection than with whoever is socially recognized as having the responsibility for a child’s upbringing. Similarly, the terms “mother” and “father” are no longer rigidly associated with the meanings of caregiver and breadwinner. These meanings are more free-flowing through changing family roles.

Interactionists also recognize how the family status roles of each member are socially constructed, which plays an important part in how people perceive and interpret social behaviour. Interactionists view the family as a group of role players or “actors” that come together to act out their parts in an effort to construct a family. These roles are up for interpretation. In the late 19th and early 20th century, a “good father,” for example, was one who worked hard to provide financial security for his children. Today, a “good father” is one who takes the time outside of work to promote his children’s emotional well-being, social skills, and intellectual growth — in some ways, a much more daunting task.

Symbolic interactionism therefore draws our attention to how the norms that define what a “normal” family is, and how it should operate, come into existence. The rules and expectations that coordinate the behaviour of family members are products of social processes and joint agreement, even if the agreements are tacit or implicit. In this perspective, norms and social conventions are not regarded as permanently fixed by functional requirements or unequal power relationships. Rather, new norms and social conventions continually emerge from ongoing social interactions to make family structures intelligible in new situations, and to enable them to operate and sustain themselves.
Challenges Families Face

Making Connections: Do Half of All Marriages End in Divorce?

It is often said that half of all marriages end in divorce. This statistic made many people cynical about marriage.

Statistics Canada data from 2008 show a marriage rate of 4.4 (per 1,000 people) and a divorce rate of 2.11. It would appear that slightly less than one-half of all marriages failed (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2014a, 2014b). Similar United States data for 2003 showed more or less exactly 50% of marriages ending in divorce (Hurley, 2005). This reasoning is deceptive, however, because instead of tracing actual marriages to see their longevity, this compares unrelated statistics. That is, the number of marriages in a given year does not have a direct correlation to the divorces occurring that same year.

American research published in the New York Times took a different approach—determining how many people had ever been married, and of those, how many later divorced. The result? According to this analysis, American divorce rates have only gone as high as 41% (Hurley, 2005).

Another way to calculate divorce rates is the total divorce rate, which projects how many new marriages would be expected to fail after 30 years based on the divorce rate by marriage duration observed in a given year. In Canada, the total divorce rate reached a high of 50.6% in 1987, after the Divorce Act was amended to allow divorces after just one year of separation (rather than the previous mandatory three years). Since then, the total divorce rate has remained steady at between 35% and 42%. In 2008, 40.7% of marriages were projected to end before their 30th anniversary (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2014a).

Sociologists can also calculate divorce rates through a cohort study. For instance, compare the percentage of marriages that are intact after five or seven years, compared to marriages that have ended in divorce after five or seven years. Sociological researchers must remain aware of research methods and how statistical results are applied. As illustrated, different methodologies and different interpretations can lead to contradictory, and even misleading, results.
Violence and Abuse

Violence and abuse are among the most serious challenges for families. Abuse can occur between spouses, between parent and child, as well as between other family members. The frequency of violence among families is difficult to determine because many cases of spousal abuse and child abuse are unreported. Studies show that abuse (reported or not) has a major impact on families and society.

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is a significant problem in Canada. One in four victims of violent crime in Canada was victimized by a spouse or family member in 2010 (Sinha, 2012). Domestic violence is often characterized as violence between household or family members, specifically spouses. To include unmarried, cohabitating, and same-sex couples, family sociologists have created the term intimate partner violence (IPV).

Women are the primary victims of intimate partner violence. It is estimated that 1 in 4 women has experienced some form of IPV in her lifetime (compared to 1 in 7 men) (Catalano, 2007). In 2011, women in Canada had more than double the risk of men of becoming a victim of police-reported family violence (Sinha, 2012). IPV may include physical violence, such as punching, kicking, or other methods of inflicting physical pain; sexual violence, such as rape or other forced sexual acts; threats and intimidation that imply either physical or sexual abuse; and emotional abuse, such as harming another’s sense of self-worth through words or controlling another’s behaviour. IPV often starts as emotional abuse and then escalates to other forms or combinations of abuse (Centers for Disease Control, 2012).

Perpetrators of IPV work to establish and maintain dependence in order to hold power and control over their victims, making them feel stupid, crazy, or ugly — in some way worthless. Between 2000 and 2010, nearly one-quarter of women who were murdered by
their intimate partners were murdered for reasons of jealousy — compared to 10% of male victims (Sinha, 2012).

IPV affects different segments of the population at different rates. The rate of self-reported IPV for Indigenous women is about 2.5 times higher than for non-Indigenous women (Sinha, 2013). The severity of intimate partner violence also differed. Nearly 6 in 10 Indigenous women reported injury because of IPV compared to 4 in 10 non-Indigenous women. As a result, Indigenous female victims were also much more likely to report that they feared for their lives because of IPV (52% compared to 31% of non-Indigenous women) (Sinha, 2013). On the other hand, visible minority and immigrant groups do not have significantly different levels of self-reported spousal violence than the rest of the population (Statistics Canada, 2011).

Overall, women ages 25 to 34 are at the greatest risk of physical or sexual assault by an intimate partner (Statistics Canada, 2011).

Accurate statistics on IPV are difficult to determine, as less than one-quarter of victims report incidents to the police (Statistics Canada, 2011). Two-thirds of victims in Statistics Canada self-reported victimization studies stated that abuse had occurred more than once prior to their first police report. Nearly 3 in 10 stated that they had been abused more than 10 times prior to reporting (Statistics Canada, 2011).

According to the Statistics Canada General Social Survey (2009), victims cite varied reasons why they are reluctant to report abuse, as shown in Table 14.3.
IPV has significant long-term effects on individuals and on society. Studies have shown that IPV damage extends beyond the direct physical or emotional wounds. Extended IPV has been linked to unemployment among victims, as many have difficulty finding or holding employment. Additionally, nearly all women who report serious domestic problems exhibit symptoms of major depression (Goodwin, Chandler, and Meisel, 2003). Female victims of IPV are also more likely to abuse alcohol or drugs, suffer from eating disorders, and attempt suicide (Silverman et al., 2001).

IPV is indeed something that affects more than just intimate partners. In a survey, 34% of respondents said they have witnessed IPV, and 59% said that they know a victim personally (Roper Starch Worldwide, 1995). Many people want to help IPV victims but are hesitant to intervene because they feel that it is a personal matter or they fear retaliation from the abuser—reasons similar to those of victims who do not report IPV.
Making Connections: Corporal Punishment Debate

News reports in June 2013 broke the sensational story of dozens of children apprehended by Child and Family Services from a small Old Order Mennonite community in southern Manitoba. Several members of the community were charged by police with assault after reports that children had been disciplined using a leather strap, whip, and cattle prod (Hitchen, 2013). At one point, authorities apprehended all the children except for one 17-year-old. (CBC News, 2013) The 1892 law that permits the use of corporal punishment for children in Canada was upheld by a Supreme Court ruling in 2004 within certain restrictions, but corporal punishment remains a controversial issue in Canada (CBC News, 2004).

Physical abuse of children comes in many forms beating, kicking, throwing, choking, hitting with objects, burning. Injury by such behaviour is considered abuse even if caregiver did not intend harm. Other types of physical contact characterized as discipline (spanking, for example) are not considered abuse if no injury results. The Supreme Court ruling stated that teachers and parents can use reasonable corrective force against children between the ages of 2 and 12 the force is “minor” and of “a transitory and trifling nature” (CBC News, 2004). The court ruled that it was unacceptable to strike a child with an object, like a strap or whip, and striking a child in the head was also unacceptable.

This issue is controversial. While some parents feel that physical discipline (corporal punishment) is an effective way to respond to bad behaviour, others feel it is abuse. According to a 2005 study of mothers with preschoolers in Manitoba and Ontario, 70% of respondents reported using corporal punishment. One-third of them used it at least once a week. A 2007 Globe and Mail poll found that 78% of Canadian parents with children under 18 believed that parents do not discipline their children enough, and another 42% believed spanking benefited child development (Pearce, 2012).

However, studies show that spanking is not an effective form of punishment. It and may lead to aggression by the victim, particularly in those who are spanked at a young age (Berlin, 2009). Analysis of research published in the Canadian Medical Association Journal found that spanking was no better than other parenting methods at eliciting compliance in children. Spanking was in fact linked to increased levels of childhood
aggression and also to long-term effects such as depression, emotional and behavioural problems, and drug and alcohol use in adulthood (Durrant and Ensom, 2012). This research led the Journal to call for the repeal of the spanking law from the Criminal Code. “It is time for Canada to remove this anachronistic excuse for poor parenting from the statute book” (Fletcher, 2012, p. 1339).

Child Abuse and Corporal Punishment

Children are among the most helpless victims of abuse. In 2010, more than 18,000 children and youth under the age of 17 were victims of police-reported family violence in Canada, accounting for nearly a quarter of all violent offences against children and youth (Sinha, 2012). Child abuse takes several forms: Neglect is most common, followed by physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological maltreatment, and medical neglect (Child Help, 2011). While the overall rate of violent crime involving children and youth is lower than the rate for the population, the rate of sexual assault is five times higher (Sinha, 2012). Girls were 37% more likely than boys to be the victim of family violence (and almost twice as likely by the time they reached ages 12 to 17 years). In large part, this is because girls are almost four times more likely to be a victim of sexual assault by a family member than boys.

Twenty-five percent of all violent crime against children and youth was perpetrated by a family member (parent, sibling, extended family member, or spouse), while another 54% involved an accused known to the victim (casual acquaintances, close friends, or dating partners) (Sinha, 2012). 59% of family violence against children was committed by parents, 19% by siblings, and 22% by other family members (Statistics Canada, 2011).

Infants are also often victims of physical abuse, particularly in the form of violent shaking. This type of physical abuse is referred to as shaken-baby syndrome, which describes a group of medical symptoms such as brain swelling and retinal hemorrhage resulting from forcefully shaking or causing impact to an infant’s head. A baby’s cry is the number one
trigger for shaking. Parents may find themselves unable to soothe a baby’s concerns and may take their frustration out on the child by shaking him or her violently. Other stress factors such as a poor economy, unemployment, and general dissatisfaction with parental life may contribute to this type of abuse. Shaken-baby syndrome was attributed as the cause of nearly one-third (31%) of family-related homicides of infants less than 1 year between 2000 and 2010 (Sinha, 2012).

Chapter Summary

What Is Marriage? What Is a Family?
Sociologists view marriage and families as societal institutions that help create the basic unit of social structure. Both marriage and a family may be defined differently — and practised differently — in cultures across the world. Families and marriages, like other institutions, adapt to social change.

Variations in Family Life
Canadians’ concepts of marriage and family are changing. Increases in cohabitation, same-sex partners, and singlehood are altering our ideas of marriage. Similarly, single parents, same-sex parents, cohabitating parents, and unwed parents are changing our notion of what it means to be a family. While many children still live in opposite-sex, two-parent, married households, these are no longer viewed as the only type of nuclear family.

Challenges Families Face
Families face a variety of challenges, including divorce, domestic violence, and child abuse. Children are also negatively impacted by violence and abuse within the home; 18,000 children are victimized by family violence each year.
Key Terms

**cohabitation:** When a couple shares a residence but is not married.

**extended family:** A household that includes at least one parent and child as well as other relatives like grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

**family:** Socially recognized groups of individuals who may be joined by blood, marriage, or adoption, and who form an emotional connection and an economic unit of society.

**family of orientation:** The family into which one is born.

**family of procreation:** A family that is formed through marriage.

**intimate partner violence (IPV):** Violence that occurs between individuals who maintain a romantic or sexual relationship; includes unmarried, cohabiting, and same-sex couples, as well as heterosexual married couples.

**marriage:** A legally recognized contract between two or more people in a sexual relationship, who have an expectation of permanence about their relationship.

**monogamy:** When someone is married to only one person at a time.

**nuclear family:** A cohabiting man and woman who maintain a socially approved sexual relationship and have at least one child.

**polygamy:** The state of being committed or married to more than one person at a time

**shaken-baby syndrome:** A group of medical symptoms, such as brain swelling and retinal hemorrhage, resulting from forcefully shaking or impacting an infant’s head.

**total divorce rate:** A projection of how many new marriages are expected to fail after 30 years, based on the divorce rate by marriage duration observed in a given year.


Chapter Quiz

What Is Marriage? What Is a Family?

1. Sociologists tend to define family in terms of:
   
a) How a given society sanctions the relationships of people who are connected through blood, marriage, or adoption.

   b) The connection of bloodlines.

   c) The status roles that exist in a family structure.

   d) How closely members adhere to social norms.

2. Research suggests that people generally feel that their current family is ------- than the family they grew up with.
   
a) Less close

   b) More close

   c) At least as close

   d) None of the above

Variations in Family Life

3. The majority of Canadian children live in ----.
   
a) Two-parent households.

   b) One-parent households.

   c) No-parent households.

   d) Multigenerational households.
4. Couples who cohabitate before marriage are------------------- couples who do not cohabitate to be married at least 10 years.
   a) Far more likely than
   b) Far less likely than
   c) Slightly less likely than
   d) Equally as likely as

5. Same-sex couple households account for --- percent of Canadian households.
   a) 1
   b) 10
   c) 15
   d) 30

Challenges Families Face

6. Research on divorce rates shows that
   a) Divorce rates in Canada are at an all-time high
   b) Researchers must be aware of research methods used and how statistical results are applied.
   c) Divorce rates in Canada are at an all-time low
   d) Divorce rates in Canada are the same as in Ireland.

7. Which of the following is true of intimate partner violence (IPV)?
a) IPV victims are more frequently men than women.

b) One in 10 women is a victim of IPV.

c) Indigenous women are more likely to be a victim of IPV than non-Indigenous women.

d) Rape is the most common form of IPV.

8. Which type of child abuse is most prevalent in Canada?

   a) Physical abuse
   b) Neglect
   c) Shaken-baby syndrome
   d) Internet stalking

Quiz answers at end of chapter

What Is Marriage? What Is a Family?

1. According to research, what are Canadians’ general thoughts on family? How do they view nontraditional family structures? How do you think these views might change in 20 years?

Variations in Family Life

2. Explain the different variations of the nuclear family and the trends that occur in each.

3. Why are some couples choosing to cohabit before marriage? What effect does cohabitation have on marriage?
Challenges Families Face

4. Explain why more than half of intimate partner violence goes unreported. Why are those who are abused unlikely to report the abuse?

Further Research

Variations in Family Life

For more statistics on marriage and family, see the Statistics Canada report based on the 2011 census: *Portrait of Families and Living Arrangements in Canada: Families, households and marital status, 2011 Census of Population* [PDF]:

Challenges Families Face

To find more information on child abuse, visit the Canadian Child Welfare Research portal:
http://cwrp.ca/child-abuse-neglect

References

Introduction to Marriage and Family


What Is Marriage? What Is a Family?


**Variations in Family Life**


**Challenges Families Face**


CBC News. (2013). Dozens of children seized from Manitoba Mennonite community: RCMP


**Solutions to Chapter Quiz**

1 A, | 2 C, | 3 A, | 4 C, | 5 C, | 6 B, | 7 C, | 8 B
Image Attributions

**Image 9.1.** Detail from mural in Open Hearth Park, Sydney, NS. Is that still true today? Photo Courtesy of constancemc/Flickr CC BY-ND 2.0. https://www.flickr.com/photos/164103414@N04/42059059002 https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for not reporting spousal abuse</th>
<th>Percentage of men who did not report</th>
<th>Percentage of women who did not report</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A personal matter</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealt with another way</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>77%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not important enough</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>64%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Didn’t want to get involved with police</td>
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<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason</td>
<td>41st Edition</td>
<td>44th Edition</td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t want spouse to get arrested</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>41%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Didn’t want anyone to find out</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police couldn’t do anything</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>26%</td>
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<td>Police wouldn’t help</td>
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<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No confidence in the criminal justice system</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of publicity</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of spouse</td>
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<td>19%</td>
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