CHAPTER

2

Defining Family

Learning Objectives

2.1 Explain how the separate spheres ideology contrasted with the reality of American families in the 19th century

2.2 Summarize the four approaches to defining family

2.3 Compare exclusionist, moderate, and inclusionist definitions of family

2.4 Describe the significance of extended families to modern American families

What is a family? This seemingly simple question lacks a simple answer. Does it mean a nuclear family—a married couple with children, all living in the same household? Does it include extended family members? And what about a couple without children—are they a family? Neither scholars nor the general public have expressed a clear consensus on who or what makes up a family. Although almost all Americans agree that the prototypical image of husband, wife, and children is a family (Powell, Bolzendahl, Geist, & Steelman, 2010; Weigel, 2008), many also agree that single parents and their children, LGBTQ couples and their children, extended families, and married couples without children also count as family. In fact, most Americans agree that what is most important to families is loving and caring relationships, not any particular family form (Weigel, 2008).

Defining family is not simply an academic exercise. It has implications for custody, immigration, access to health insurance, medical decision making, inheritance, and many other real-life concerns. For example, immigration policy prioritizes family reunification in assigning visas, and spouses and children are given priority over other family members. Legal spouses are exempt from paying estate taxes when a partner dies, but long-term cohabiting partners are not. A narrow

focus on nuclear families—an adult couple and their children—also obscures much family life, particularly how it is experienced by people of color, LGBTQ individuals, and people living in poverty, all of whom have rich relationships in extended and nonkin family systems (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2012).

This chapter begins with a description of what Dorothy Smith (1993) has called the **Standard North American Family (SNAF)**, a family image that emerged in the 19th century and that continues to have profound influence on how families are defined today. Next, I present four different approaches to defining family and then consider how our ideas about family shift when we move extended families to the center of analysis. Throughout, we will explore how family definitions are shaped by race, social class, and sexuality. We will also consider how family definitions have changed over time and how they continue to prioritize marriage and children.

The Standard North American Family and the Ideology of Separate Spheres

When asked to describe a traditional family, most Americans imagine a married heterosexual couple with children. The husband is employed, and his earnings are used to support the family. The wife's primary duty is caring for home, children, and husband, although she may also earn some income. Dorothy Smith (1993) used the term SNAF to capture this image, one that is laden with ideological codes used to frame our family experiences. Even though most of us recognize that many families do not actually look like this, the image maintains powerful ideological sway.

The family ideals expressed in the SNAF image—breadwinning husband and homemaking wife—started to take hold in the United States in the 19th century. Before then, family codes looked different. Households were large, and they were highly integrated into and regulated by the small agrarian communities of which they were a part. As you will learn in later chapters, early American views on marriage and childrearing were much more utilitarian than they would become in the 19th and 20th centuries. All household members were household workers—the economic survival of the household required it. Men planted crops and tended livestock; some men also worked in a trade such as blacksmithing. Household survival also depended on the labor of women. Women tended gardens, cared for smaller animals, worked in the fields, prepared meals, put up food for winter, and sewed and cared for clothing. Women spent very little time tending to children.

Children were also put to work from a young age, starting to assist their parents with gender-specialized tasks by age seven or eight. It was also common, particularly among the Puritans, for parents to send their children to live with other families as servants for a period of time. This was intended to teach children

H. W. PEIRCE, Del.   Entered according to the Act of Congress in the year 1876, by H. W. Pierce, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress at Washington.

A NEW ENGLAND KITCHEN.
A HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

Idealized image of a Colonial New England white family, as depicted in 1876.

industriousness and respect for authority, the most important childrearing values of the time. Households were legally and explicitly patriarchal, with the male head of household owning the labor of those within it. Few institutions outside of the family existed, so families were responsible for the education, health care, religious instruction, and vocational training of their members.

Over the course of the 19th century, American society experienced significant social change. Between 1810 and 1900, the share of the labor force working in the manufacturing sector grew almost sevenfold, and the rural population declined from 93 to 60 percent of the U.S. population. The end of slavery led to the dismantling of plantation agriculture, which gave way to sharecropping, and by the early decades of the 20th century, millions of African Americans abandoned the agricultural South to migrate to the industrial North, what is called the Great Migration. By 1920, more Americans lived in cities than in rural areas, and more people worked in industry than in agriculture (U.S. Census Bureau, 1975). Fertility also declined dramatically during this period. Women born in the mid-1800s tended to give birth to more than five children. By the end of the 19th century, women,

on average, were giving birth to just over three (Jones & Tertilt, 2006). In addition, families spread apart as young adults left the farms and moved to cities to find jobs in the growing manufacturing and trade sector. The expansion of public schooling in the early 20th century also helped to extend childhood and adolescence and to create a distinct youth culture.

It is during this period of industrialization in the 19th century that our contemporary ideas about "traditional" American families emerged. Most significantly, this is when the **separate spheres ideology**, represented in the SNAF image, took hold. This ideology held that the public sphere of work and the private sphere of home were independent realms of existence, the former characterized by masculine ideals of competition and individualism and the latter by feminine ideals of nurturance and care. Men devoted their days to working in the market economy, and women spent theirs caring for children and the home. No longer seen as work, women's homemaking was redefined as an idealized expression of love.

Although this idealized division of labor was not the reality for most of the population, it was—and is—presented as universal. The experience of a small, privileged segment of the population was generalized to all, ignoring class, race, and regional differences in families. The reality is that many women continued to work in productive labor to support their families even in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This was true especially in rural areas and among unmarried working-class white women, married immigrant women, and women of color. In 1900, greater than 40 percent of African American women were employed as were 19 percent of Asian American women (Amott & Matthaei, 1996) and 44 percent of unmarried white women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

Applying a class lens to the ideology of separate spheres is an important reminder that family diversity emerges because families are positioned in different social locations. The industrial economy developed in different parts of the United States at different times, and not everyone was granted the same access to this new sector. As a result,

Women working in a factory in 1895 Massachusetts. Working-class women were not able to live up to the separate spheres ideal.

the family changes that accompanied industrialization also varied across class and racial-ethnic groups. For example, until the Great Migration, most African American families continued to live in the agricultural South. As a result, their family patterns, including higher fertility and women's involvement in productive labor, reflected these agrarian conditions. The same was true for white rural families in the Midwest and Latino families in the Southwest.

The separate spheres ideology also ignores the reality of the many connections between the public and private spheres. Far from separate, they are highly integrated. Some men could devote their energies to breadwinning because they had a wife to take care of responsibilities at home. Some women could devote themselves to caregiving only because they were dependent on the wages of their husbands and the labor of other women to support their domesticity. Remember, separate spheres ideology emerged long before modern conveniences like off-the-rack clothing, washing machines, and refrigeration. Clothes had to be sewn and laundered by hand, and food had to be prepared from scratch. Middle-class women relied on the labor of working-class women, including European immigrants in the Northeast, Mexican Americans in the Southwest, and African Americans in the South, to get this work done. By idealizing the private sphere, this ideology made invisible much of the hard labor required to maintain white feminine domesticity.

The separation of work and home into two distinct spheres was an illusion in the 19th century when it first emerged, and it is an illusion that continues today. We can see this in the structure of the labor market, which assumes that workers do not have family responsibilities. A good worker is one who can be at work whenever a boss or client needs them. A good worker has no laundry to do, meals to prepare, or children to care for. A good worker puts work above all else. These expectations are fully rooted in the ideology of separate spheres: The only way these expectations can be met is if the worker has a full-time caregiver at home. The illusion of separate spheres is one reason why U.S. workers have no guarantee of paid family leave and why so many parents are struggling to balance their work and home responsibilities. The institution of work continues to be governed by the ideology of separate spheres and has not adjusted to contemporary family realities.

Defining Family: Four Approaches

Although the SNAF image offers a limited understanding of the family institution, coming up with an alternative definition that captures the complexity of family life is challenging. Family can be defined in many ways, and sociologists have no agreement on the best way to do so. A useful starting point for our discussion is an influential definition of the family that was developed by sociologists Ernest W. Burgess and Harvey J. Locke in the mid-20th century, a time when

the heterosexual breadwinner–homemaker family was at its peak:

> The family may now be defined as a group of persons united by ties
> of marriage, blood, or adoption; constituting a single household;
> interacting and communicating with each other in their respective social
> roles of husband and wife, mother and father, son and daughter, brother
> and sister; and creating and maintaining a common culture. (Burgess &
> Locke, 1945, p. 2)

Burgess and Locke's description includes four distinct approaches to defining family, each of which is still in use by sociologists today: (1) **structural**, (2) **household-based**, (3) **role-based**, and (4) **interactionist**. Let's explore each of these in turn.

1. Family as Structure

First, family is "a group of persons united by ties of marriage, blood, or adoption." This represents a *structural* approach to defining family, focusing on formal legal relationships between family members. This is the narrowest way to define families, and it is one that continues to have wide influence in the United States. Most research on families, including data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau, uses a structural definition, and legal and blood ties are the key to what many people consider "real" families. In addition, widespread benefits accrue to those who fall under this definition, from inheritance to immigration to insurance. A structural definition of family is exclusive in that it limits family members to those occupying those legal roles; a long-time cohabiting couple, for example, is not included, although a married same-sex couple is.

Both the symbolic and the practical influence of this structural definition of family is seen in the privileged place that marriage continues to hold in American families. Despite changing marriage patterns over the past few decades (which you will learn more about in Chapter 5), marriage continues to bestow legitimacy to relationships. Not only is "marital status a factor in determining or receiving benefits, rights, and privileges" in more than 1,100 federal laws (General Accounting Office, 2004), but marriage holds symbolic value as well. For example, some same-sex couples report that their coworkers and relatives finally recognize the legitimacy and seriousness of their relationships now that they are legally married (Kimport, 2014).

Marriage and family are so closely intertwined in our culture that it is difficult for couples who aren't married to be seen as legitimate families. Some progressive activists, in fact, have argued *against* same-sex marriage for exactly this reason, in that it continues to elevate marriage as the most legitimate family form. Instead of expanding marital privilege to include same-sex couples, they argue, we should dismantle marital privilege all together. In essence, these activists are arguing against a structural definition of family.

2. Family as Household

The second component of the Burgess and Locke (1945) definition of family is that family members "constitut[e] a single household." The terms *family* and *household* are often used interchangeably in the United States, but they are two distinct concepts. A **household** consists of all persons sharing a residential unit, such as a free-standing house or an apartment. Households may consist of nuclear families, multigenerational families, cohabiting couples, friends living together as housemates, or some combination thereof. You will recall from Figure 1.3 in Chapter 1 that approximately one-third of households are considered nonfamily households, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau—consisting of a person living alone or living with other people to whom they are not related by marriage, blood, or adoption. In fact, the fastest growing household type in the United States is a person living alone. Extremely rare until the late 20th century—and illegal in some towns during the Colonial period—28 percent of households in 2019 consist of one person, more than double the rate in 1960 (U.S. Census, 2019c).

Although the Burgess and Locke (1945) definition limits a family to a single household, families may in fact cross households. Consider a child whose parents are divorced. As joint custody has become more common (you will learn more about this in Chapter 6), children are likely to spend significant time in each parent's household. Yet, household-based definitions limit the child's family to just one. And what about a person living alone? Is this person without a family? Not at all—they are likely to have parents, siblings, extended family, and close friends considered to be family. Some even have long-term romantic partners from whom they have decided to live apart. Called **living apart together**, or LAT relationships for short, they have not been the focus of much research in the United States, reflecting a household bias in the definition of families. Estimates suggest that 7 percent to 10 percent of the population in Australia, North America, and Western Europe are in LAT relationships (Connidis, Borell, & Karlsson, 2017). In the United States, this represents 35 percent of individuals who are not cohabiting or married (Strohm, Seltzer, Cochran, & Mays, 2009).

The common conflation of family and household in the United States reflects our bias toward the nuclear family. When we disentangle these two concepts, more complex family meanings emerge. For example, in her classic ethnographic study of African American families living in a poor Midwestern community that she called The Flats, Stack (1974) found that,

> [T]he "household" and its group composition was not a meaningful unit to isolate for analysis of family life in The Flats. A resident in The Flats who eats in one household may sleep in another, and contribute resources to yet another. He may consider himself a member of all three households. . . . The family network is diffused over several kin-based households, and fluctuations in household composition do not significantly affect cooperative familial arrangements. (p. 31)

Transnational families offer another example of a family type that transcends the household; in fact, these families transcend national borders. Whether it is due to legal restrictions, concern about the safety of the immigration crossing, or economic need, millions of families are split across two countries (Foner & Dreby, 2011). This is certainly true for extended families, but it is also true for nuclear families. A husband may leave a spouse and children in his home country and migrate for work. A widowed or divorced mother may leave her children living with their grandmother for the same reason. Like other families who transcend households, transnational families highlight the limitations of a family definition that confines families to a single household.

3. Family Roles

The third part of the Burgess and Locke (1945) definition states that family members are "interacting and communicating with each other in their respective social roles of husband and wife, mother and father, son and daughter, brother and sister." As you learned in the first chapter, family sociologists are interested in how individuals enact social roles and in the scripts associated with these roles. This third part of the definition acknowledges this sociological focus. How one behaves as a family member is not entirely up to the individual. Each of us is strongly influenced by the social roles we occupy, and the scripts attached to these roles shape how family members behave and how they interact with each other. For example, the script for the husband role includes an expectation that he is the head of the household and that he is the main economic provider for the family. Most men continue to feel accountable to this expectation, and this is one of the reasons why men focus on wage earning rather than caregiving.

A limitation in the way that Burgess and Locke (1945) describe these social roles is the definition's focus on gender differentiation, heterosexuality, and the **nuclear family**. The husband role exists in opposition to the wifely role. The role of a son differs from that of a daughter. Although it is true that gendered expectations for spouses and for children are still strongly embedded in our families, which you will learn more about throughout the book, these specific family roles are not inherent to families, which the definition implies. One need not have a husband and a wife or a son and a daughter to have a family. And many families include roles beyond this limited list, such as extended family members and stepfamily members.

4. Family as Interaction: Doing Family

The final part of the definition states that through interaction and communication, family members are "creating and maintaining a common culture." This emphasizes the ways that families are actively created through interaction, what can be described as an interactionist approach to defining family. Sometimes called "doing family," this approach recognizes that families are symbolic entities that

gain meaning from shared activities and emotional attachment. As Christopher Carrington (1999) describes it, "what or who constitutes a family derives from whether the participants engage in a consistent and relatively reciprocal pattern of loving and caring activities and understand themselves to be bound to . . . other family members" (p. 5).

The interactionist approach to defining family argues that families are best understood as a pattern of shared activities and relationships rather than the fulfillment of structurally prescribed roles. It is in the process of sharing meals, celebrating holidays, and investing emotion, time, money, and other resources into a relationship that one becomes a family; it is not automatic, but it is created through these activities. Unlike definitions that focus on legal relationships, shared households, and family roles, interactionist definitions of family focus on the expressive (love and care) and instrumental (doing things for each other) activities that take place among groups of two or more people, even in the absence of formal family roles or legal ties.

Defining Family: A Summary

The Burgess and Locke (1945) definition of family, although limited when considered in full, effectively highlights four different ways to understand the family as a social institution:

1. *Structural definitions* focus on marriage, blood, and legally adoptive relationships.

2. *Household-based definitions* consider family members living in a single household.

3. *Role-based definitions* focus on family roles and their associated scripts.

4. *Interactionist definitions* highlight the ways that families are actively created through interaction and relationship.

The definition one uses will often depend on goals and circumstances. For a demographer at the U.S. Census Bureau who is interested in examining how family patterns have changed over time, a household-based structural definition might work best. If one is interested in the networks of care among extended families, then an interactionist definition would be more appropriate.

What this emphasizes is that the family is "as much idea as thing" (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990, p. 163). And how that idea gets expressed will shift over time, place, and situation, not only for different people but also for the same person in different circumstances. It is not uncommon, for example, for individuals to use structural or role-based definitions when defining family in the abstract and to use interactionist definitions when thinking about their own families (Powell et al., 2010). Similarly, in his research with gay and lesbian families, Carrington (1999)

found that many of his respondents rejected narrow structural definitions of family and instead described family as a "way of behaving" (p. 5), which is a more interactionist understanding. At the same time, the same participants sometimes embraced structural definitions to advocate for gay and lesbian inclusion in them, such as with same-sex marriage. Like Carrington's respondents, I also define family differently in different circumstances. I am a family demographer, and my research uses structural and household-based definitions of family. Yet, when I teach about families and talk about families to a general audience, I tend to emphasize doing family, family as it is created through interaction, because it reflects the complexity of family life as it is actually lived by most Americans.

How Americans Define Family

It is clear to most observers that who counts as a family has changed over time. The narrow focus on a married heterosexual couple and their children has expanded to include other family types, including LGBTQ families, cohabiting couples, step-families, and single parents and their children. The rhetoric around same-sex marriage has highlighted the competing definitions held by Americans, with some insisting that the only legitimate family is a married heterosexual couple and their children, whereas others insist that love makes a family, regardless of who is in it.

Sociologist Brian Powell and his colleagues wanted to answer the question "who counts as family?" and interviewed a nationally representative sample of Americans to find out how they define family, "who they believe fits under the abstract umbrella of 'family'" (Powell et al., 2010, p. 5). They found that Americans tend to fall into three categories—exclusionists, moderates, and inclusionists.

The exclusionists expressed the strictest definition of family, basing their ideas on structural and role-based understandings of family: "A family is a married couple with children" (Powell et al., 2010, p. 41), one respondent stated simply. This category of respondents identified heterosexual marriage and biological or adopted children as key features of a family; they were especially resistant to counting same-sex couples as a family. An analysis of their language use during the interviews found that they used role-based and gender-specific language like "husband" and "wife" much more frequently than other respondents. For exclusionists, marriage and family were one; as Powell and his colleagues write about their interviews with this group, "The transcripts of our interviews are replete with phrases such as 'the marriage vow,' 'the marriage covenant,' 'ceremonial arrangements,' 'legal marriage,' 'legal connection,' and 'legally binding'" (Powell et al., 2010, p. 38). Exclusionists made up approximately 45 percent of the sample in 2003, 38 percent in 2006, and 34 percent in 2010 (Powell, Bolzendahl, Geist, & Steelman, 2015).

Like the exclusionists, people in the moderate group also relied on structural definitions, but moderates incorporated more interactionist ideas about family as

well. For most moderates, who made up approximately one-third of the sample in all three study years, children make the family, regardless of the gender and marital status of their parents. Moderates said things like "I think you need children to be a real family" (Powell et al., 2010, p. 48) and "As soon as there are kids involved, then it's a family, whether they're both same sex or not" (p. 50). Many moderates also "emphasized expressive qualities . . . such as love, caring, and emotional bonds, or instrumental qualities . . . such as taking care of each other, buying a house, and earning income" (Powell et al., 2010, p. 51), illustrating a more interactionist approach to defining family.

The moderates differed from exclusionists and inclusionists in the ambivalence that was evident in their sometimes contradictory views. Initially, they said marriage must be between a man and a woman, yet over the course of the interview, they also expressed the idea that a family is "just two people that love each other" (Powell et al., 2010, p. 52). Recognizing these contradictions, moderates became more inclusive in their definitions as they reflected on what makes a family.

An example of this shift comes from the parent of one of my former students. When I teach sociology of families, I ask students to replicate the Powell et al. (2010) study by asking their friends and family members to fill out the survey portion of the study, identifying which of 11 living arrangements count as family. Several years ago, one student's mother provided mostly exclusive definitions of family—she considered neither same-sex couples nor cohabiting couples with children to be real families. A few hours after filling out the survey, the mother called the student back, saying, "I want to change my answers." Upon reflection, she realized that she did believe that same-sex couples and cohabiting couples with children count as families. Like the moderates in Powell et al.'s (2010) study, her unexamined definitions of family became more inclusive after a bit of introspection. This isn't to say that this process happens for all moderates, but for those whose responses reflected a tension between structural and interactionist definitions, they tended to move toward inclusion (Powell et al., 2010).

The final category was the inclusionists, who tended to rely primarily on interactionist definitions of family. Respondents in this category were less concerned about roles and formal legal ties and more concerned with the love and commitment between family members. One respondent said, "A living arrangement doesn't make a family, period. How the people treat each other makes a family" (Powell et al., 2010, p. 55). Another said, "Two people living together who love each other. . . . It's got to have love in there to make a family" (p. 56), and "If you depend on each other to survive—well, if you're physically, mentally, or financially dependent on someone else—then I would consider them a family" (p. 58). Inclusionists frequently used words like "commitment," "responsibility," "love," and "emotional," which set them apart from other respondents. Over the seven years of the study, the proportion of the sample that was inclusive rose from 25 percent to 33 percent, with most of that change occurring between 2003 and 2006 (Powell et al., 2015).

The argument that "love is love" represents an inclusive definition of family.

Powell et al.'s (2010) study highlights the contradictory, complex, changing, and nuanced ways that Americans define the family. Some are firm in their beliefs, whereas others are more tenuous. Across all three categories, we see how Americans use structure, households, roles, and interactions to delineate who makes a family and who does not. We also see how definitions are shaped by social location—several factors emerged as important correlates of whether respondents were exclusive, moderate, or inclusive (Powell et al., 2010). One of these factors is gender, with men being more exclusive and women more inclusive. Another is age, with almost 80 percent of respondents younger than 30 years of age falling in the moderate or inclusive categories and almost 60 percent of those 65 or older being exclusive. We also see differences by level of education, with more than half of those with a high-school degree expressing exclusive definitions, whereas those with a college degree were about evenly split among the three categories. Few racial differences emerged, although there was a clear rural–urban divide, with rural residents being more exclusive. Finally, two-thirds of religious fundamentalists were exclusive as were half of those who did not have any gays or lesbians in their social networks.

Extended Families

The nuclear family—parents and their children—is the prototypical family form in the United States (Weigel, 2008). Even as Americans are starting to expand their definitions of family, moving away from a narrow husband–wife–children definition, most of these expansions are variations on the nuclear family, such as a single parent and his or her children or a cohabiting couple with children. What tends to be obscured in these nuclear family ideologies are the complex networks of extended family members that are most resonant for many people. From childcare to economic support to social support, most Americans are deeply embedded in extended family networks. In fact, most of us couldn't get by without them.

For example, more than 40 percent of children in the United States younger than 5 years of age are regularly cared for by a relative, most often a grandparent, while their parents work (Laughlin, 2013). More than a quarter of respondents to a national survey reported that they had exchanged financial, housework, or transportation help with kin in the recent past (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004). In 2016, over 28 million Americans lived in households with three or more generations (Cohn & Passel, 2018). And older adults in need of assistance are cared for most often by family members. These examples illustrate the importance of extended families to family well-being even though much of this care is unseen and unacknowledged.

The term *extended family* generally applies to kin other than spouses and dependent children. It can include four types of relationships (Johnson, 2000), which are often referred to collectively as *kinship*. First are *lineal* relationships formed between direct descendants, such as grandparents, parents, and grandchildren. Second are *collateral* kin, to whom one is related by blood but not in a direct line, such as siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles. Third are *in-law* relationships created through marriage. Finally, many people have family ties with those to whom they are not related by blood or marriage, what is variously called *fictive kin*, *chosen kin*, or *voluntary kin*. This would include godparents, informally adopted children, and long-time friends who are considered part of the family.

Several demographic changes are raising the visibility and importance of extended family relationships in the United States. First, longer life expectancies mean that three- and even four-generation families are not uncommon. Uhlenberg (1996) found that children born in the year 2000 are more likely to have a grandparent alive at age 20 than children born in the year 1900 were to have a mother alive at the same age. People are not only living longer but healthier as well, which increases their availability to be an active part of the lives of younger kin (you will read more about this in Chapter 10).

Most Americans are deeply integrated into extended families.

At the same time that longer life expectancies increase the availability of intergenerational ties, lower fertility results in fewer collateral relationships with similarly aged kin. In the early 20th century, the average woman had more than three children. That figure had been reduced to 1.7 by 2018 (Livingston, 2019a). This not only means fewer siblings but fewer cousins, aunts, and uncles as well (although those aunts and uncles are also living to older ages). Demographers have come to describe the U.S. age structure as a **beanpole**—long and thin "with more family generations alive but with fewer members in each generation" (Bengston, 2001, p. 5).

Third, lower marriage rates and higher levels of relationship instability mean that extended family relationships may come to overshadow nuclear family ties for well-being and support over the life course (Bengston, 2001). **Multipartner fertility**, when an adult has children with more than one partner, also expands the pool of potential kin for children who can create connections with each parent's family networks. However, more research is needed to know whether and how these relationships are activated and maintained over the long term (Furstenberg, 2014).

Finally, immigration to the United States from countries and regions that have more established traditions of extended family relations may also help to increase the role of extended families in the United States. *Compadrazgo* relationships among Latinos, filial piety among Asians, and West African kin patterns that place

a high value on extended family relationships continue to influence the family experiences of people of color living in the United States, particularly among first and second generations. Over time, more research will be needed on how their extended family traditions are integrated into, and adapted to, the U.S. context.
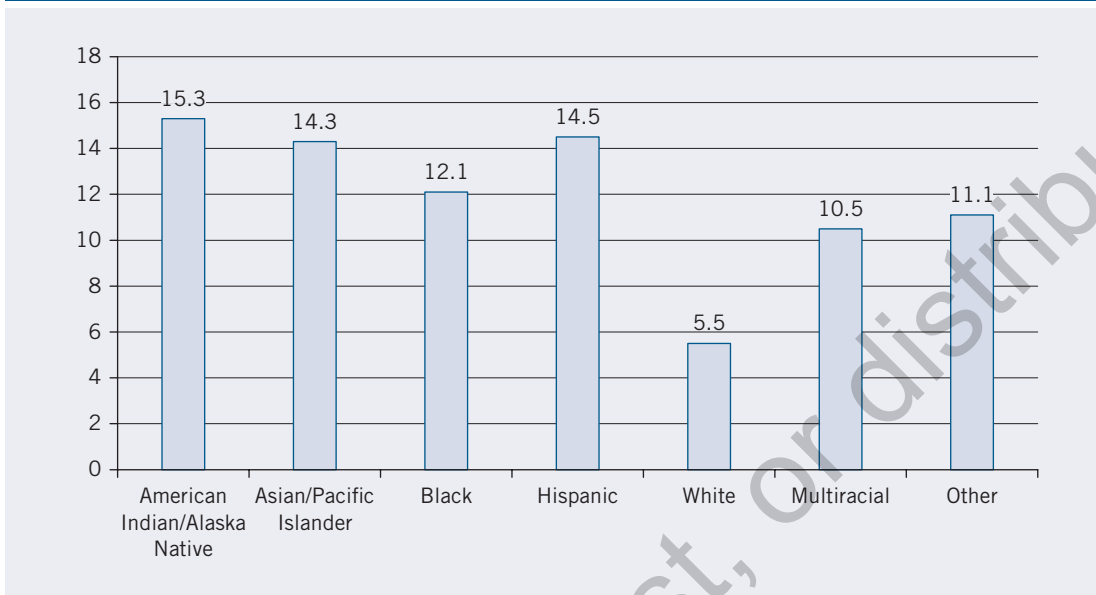
Diversity and Inequality Among Extended Families

Scholars who study extended families have focused on two main areas: emotional ties between kin and the exchange of instrumental support. Overwhelmingly, most adult Americans report that they are emotionally close to their parents, to their adult children, and to their grandchildren (Swartz, 2009). Instrumental ties are also common. Extended family members exchange material support, such as monetary gifts, as well as practical support with things like housework, transportation, and caregiving. Most intergenerational assistance moves down the generations rather than up; it is only at the oldest and frailest ages that people receive more help than they give.

Differences in extended family patterns across racial groups in the United States have been well documented. One place that we see this is in multigenerational living: Three-generation households are far more common among people of color than among white people. As shown in Figure 2.1, American Indians/Alaska Natives, Asians/Pacific Islanders, African Americans, Hispanics, people who are multiracial, and people who identify as another race are more than twice as likely as white people to live in **multigenerational households**. Multigenerational Latino and Asian households are especially likely to include at least one member who is foreign born (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013). Sarkisian and Gerstel (2012) found that Black and Latino people were more likely than white people to live not only with kin but also near kin and to exchange instrumental support with kin, such as helping with housework and providing transportation.

Although racial-ethnic differences in extended family relationships are evident, social class is an important part of the story as well. Compositional analysis of the differences between white and Mexican Americans in their levels of integration with kin, for example, found that culture explained little of the observed differences; most kinship differences between these two racial-ethnic groups were explained by socioeconomic status (Sarkisian, Gerena, & Gerstel, 2007), with those of lower socioeconomic status reporting more interaction with kin than those with more resources.

Qualitative data show similar patterns. In their interviews with upper-class physicians and working-class nursing assistants, Sarkisian and Gerstel (2012) noted a marked difference in how their respondents talked about family. When the physicians were asked about their families, they talked about partners and children and, occasionally, their parents. When the nursing assistants spoke about their families, they included siblings, mothers, aunts, nieces, and nephews. One nursing assistant, a 20-year-old Black woman who lives with her partner and son, explained, "'I don't actually have family out here. My family's in Philly.' For her,

Figure 2.1 Percentage Living in Households With Three or More Generations, by Race and Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	Percentage
American Indian/Alaska Native	15.3
Asian/Pacific Islander	14.3
Black	12.1
Hispanic	14.5
White	5.5
Multiracial	10.5
Other	11.1

Source: IPUMS American Community Survey, 2013-2017 five-Year Sample

family is not her partner and son; family is her relatives—her mother, cousins, and grandparents" (p. 33). As Sarkisian and Gerstel (2012) state, "Extended kin *are* family for these low wage nursing assistants" (p. 33, emphasis in original).

Extended families are also gendered, in that it is women who tend to do much of the **kinkeeping** that maintains relationships between extended family members. Women of all racial backgrounds organize family gatherings, cook holiday meals, and keep in touch with family members with phone calls and e-mails. Women also provide more practical help to family members than do men, including more childcare and elder care (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004, 2012).

Finally, extended families are also shaped by sexual identity. In her classic study of gay and lesbian families, Weston (1991) found that *chosen families*— families made up of partners, friends, and ex-partners—were common. Particularly for earlier generations of LGBTQ individuals for whom estrangement from families of origin was not uncommon, they were left to create families of their own, free from the constraints of nuclear family ideologies. Now that same-sex couples have access to legal marriage, additional research will be needed on how the changing legal context affects how they define family.

Although the importance of extended family networks is well documented, the focus on nuclear families in family discourse obscures much of this family life.

The myth of individualism masks the variety of ways that families rely on the people around them for support, sustenance, and care. Karen Hansen (2005) analyzed the "networks of care" for families in a range of social classes, and all of them, even the most privileged, relied on people outside of the nuclear family in their day-to-day lives. Yet, this assistance was usually underplayed or even made invisible. Robert, one of her respondents, is adamant that he, alone, is the one who cares for his son when the son visits. Yet, when he tells his story in more detail, it is clear that he relies on his sister and her family, with whom he lives, and a best friend to assist with the tasks of caregiving. Like most parents, he is not doing it alone, but the American myth of individualism obscures many of these extended family exchanges.

What happens when researchers and policy makers assume that the only family that counts is nuclear families? The focus on marriage and childrearing as the defining features of family reinforces public concerns about family decline. However, families are "declining" only to the extent that marriage is becoming less common. Other types of family relationships, including relationships with extended kin, are as strong as they have ever been, if not stronger. For many, extended families have become more important as marriage has become less common. Without a lifelong partner, parents instead rely on extended family—their parents, siblings, and relatives—to help care for their children. So, rather than being an indicator of family decline, lower marriage rates may instead be an indicator of the growing importance of extended family relationships (Bengston, 2001).

Change, Continuity, and Diversity in Defining Families

Definitions of families have changed over time. Burgess and Locke's (1945) influential definition, which included structural, household-based, role-based, and interactionist components, assumed that a family should meet all four of these criteria. Today, more Americans are using only one or two of these criteria, rather than on all of them. In addition, many express conflicting views, sometimes relying on structural definitions and sometimes using more interactionist ideas. Powell et al.'s (2015) research demonstrates that Americans have become less exclusive in their definitions of family, primarily by becoming more accepting of gay and lesbian families.

What has remained consistent is the central role that marriage plays in defining family. Same-sex couples who legally marry gain legitimacy as a family that couples—gay or straight—who choose not to marry often lack. Similarly, children continue to be seen as a central definitional component of families. Even in the absence of marriage, the presence of children in a household makes it more likely to be perceived as a family, and couples without children are more often excluded.

That marriage and children remain central to family definitions shows how the nuclear family continues to dominate Americans' understandings about families. Family definitions have broadened in many ways, but variations of the nuclear family remain at the core. Extended families remain marginal in family research and discourse even though they are increasingly important in the lives of many.

MAIN IDEAS

- How one defines family has both symbolic and practical implications.

- The SNAF and separate spheres ideology are historically specific ideals that continue to shape U.S. families. They also apply differently to families in different social locations.

- Sociologists use four approaches to defining family: structural, household-based, role-based, and interactionist.

- Americans are becoming more inclusive in their definitions of family, integrating interactionist and structural definitions.

- Extended kin are becoming increasingly important in American families.