## Objectives

- **History of the Family**
- **The Family Today**
- **Defining the Family**
  - Theoretical Definitions
  - Variations on a Definition of Family
- **Worldview**
  - The Gray Areas
- **Changes in the Family**
- **In the News**
- **Family Functions**
- **Families Within Cultural Contexts**
- **Reality Check**
- **Researching the Family**
  - Family Systems Theory
  - Exchange Theory
  - Symbolic Interactionism
  - Conflict Theory
  - Feminist Perspective
  - Family Ecological Theory
  - Family Strengths Framework
  - Family Development Theory
- **Family Research Design**

## Objectives

- Be aware of the history and origins of the family.
- Recognize that the family today is in transition.
- Acknowledge the variety of definitions of family and the sources of those definitions.
- Be familiar with the functions of the family both in the past and today.
- Be aware of the purpose and usefulness of theory in understanding families.
- Be familiar with the basic family theories or conceptual frameworks.
- Acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of family theories/perspectives.
- Be aware of the two basic types of research methodology, both quantitative and qualitative.
The family. We were a strange little band of characters trudging through life sharing diseases and toothpaste, coveting one another’s desserts, hiding shampoo, borrowing money, locking each other out of our rooms, inflicting pain and kissing to heal it in the same instant, loving, laughing, defending, and trying to figure out the common thread that bound us all together.

—Erma Bombeck

The most basic unit of society is the family. It is hard to imagine someone who has never experienced being part of a family. In fact, almost everyone can tell a story about his or her family. For most, this unit is where we learn strength and courage to face the outside world. Effective management of the family is critical not only to the family, but to the individual members within the family. The family is where we learn to make good decisions and experience the consequences of bad decisions. A study of the family begins with the history of the family.

History of the Family

The origins of the family are unclear. Some have suggested that there is evidence that families have existed for thousands, perhaps millions, of years (Gough, 1971). Anderson (1997) speculates that although prehistoric clans were organized around a patriarch with the development of agriculture, it became necessary to organize around geographic areas ruled by political figures, rather than by the head of the family. In medieval Europe, the family was influenced by the church and feudalism, generally extended in form (Seufert-Barr, 1994). Tadmor (1996) studied the definition of a family as it appeared in 18th-century English writings. She found that the term included not only immediate blood relatives in the household, but also servants and other relatives in residence. The criterion for inclusion as a family unit at that time was an individual’s dependence on the head of household for basic needs.

The institution of marriage within the family is also varied. As early as 1922, Westermarck described the origin of marriage as:

It was, I believe, even in primitive times, the habit for a man and a woman to live together to have sexual relations with one another, and to rear their offspring in common, the man, being the protector and supporter of his family and the woman being his helpmate and the nurse of his children. This habit was sanctioned by custom, and afterwards by law and was thus transformed into a social institution. (pp. 27–28)
Gibbs and Campbell (1999) reported that religious and social groups experimented with different forms of familial social bonds in America during the 19th century. The practice of polygyny, having multiple wives, existed in certain religious factions and in some Native American cultures. Larger households meant an increase in children and wealth. Multiple adult members provided resources necessary to fulfill the many daily needs of large family units.

In America, the preindustrial family was largely an economic unit. Those who lived together were needed to help provide for existence. Families sometimes included nonfamily members whose purpose was to care for the children or carry out household work. Children, once old enough, were often sent to help other families if they were not needed at home.

After the Industrial Revolution, work was no longer centered in the home. Men went away from the home to work, and family roles were more defined. As the middle class emerged, the family became a symbol of stability and the domestic ideal (Skolnick, 1993). The modern family consisted of a bread-winning husband, a housewife, and their children. According to Aulette (2002), the modern family included two distinct phases. First, the democratic family emerged at the end of the 18th century as a separate and private group in society where mates were selected through preferences and children were nurtured. Creating and maintaining a family was an expected, almost obligatory, role for adults. Husbands went to work outside the home, and wives were expected to stay home. By the 20th century, the second phase, the companionate family, had become the most common family form. In the companionate family, husbands and wives were partners who married because they loved each other, rather than out of a sense of moral duty (Mintz & Kellogg, 1988).

The postmodern family implies that families at this time in history are so diverse that comparison with those in the past is impossible. Another implied concept within the term postmodern is that, in trying to rely on past research and theory, one would be unable to study current family structures and relationships.

The Family Today

Throughout history, researchers have been unable to find a picture of family that would represent what it has come to mean today or what it will be in the future. How we define the family today must be broad and flexible. One definition would not be able to accurately characterize every family in the United States. The traditional family or nuclear family implies a husband, wife, and children in one household. Although this idea has come to symbolize the American family, it is far from representing the vast majority of families.
The functions of the family will lead us into our discussion throughout the text. Before we look at these functions, it is helpful to look at the diverse ways that family units are defined.

Defining the Family

The word *family* still brings to mind the image of an intact, two-parent home with two children, a dog, and gray-haired grandparents. In reality, we have just learned that in the United States we can no longer define the family in this way. In the past, the definition of family has been selective and often rigid in description, leaving many to wonder about the validity of their own family. Given the various configurations of families today, creating a contemporary definition of *family* can be a difficult task. The definition of family takes on diverse meanings depending on the context from which it comes.

**THEORETICAL DEFINITIONS**

Within the study of family resource management, interdependence of members and the continual need for decision-making to meet needs of
members are key concepts. Although no single definition meets all situational needs, those within the field of family sciences incorporate core concepts founded not only as a result of research and the development of family theory, but in response to the changes that have taken place within society. Existing definitions that address the study of families include the following:

A group of persons united by the ties of marriage, blood, or adoption; constituting a single household; interacting and communication with each other in their respective social roles; and creating and maintaining a common culture. (Burgess & Locke, 1945)

A range of household structures that meet people’s needs at various points in their lives or that are forced on them by circumstances. (Hess, 1995)

A consuming unit that is highly dependent on the economic system beyond the home, over which the family members have little control. (Hess, 1995)

Two or more persons who share resources, share responsibility for decisions, share values and goals, and have a commitment to one another over time. (American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences, 2003)

As families search for public and private resources, they must navigate the multitude of definitions held by different institutions. It is hard to put the family into one philosophical box. Throughout history, the family has changed to meet the needs of its members. Family will be defined in this text based on three core concepts drawn from Lamanna and Reidmann (2006):

(1) an economic unit that strives to provide for the needs of its members,

(2) two or more people who self-identify as part of the family unit and are significantly attached to that unit, and

(3) members who are committed to maintaining that group over time.

All three criteria have major implications for resource identification, access, and management.

**VARIATIONS ON A DEFINITION OF FAMILY—WHEN NUMBERS ARE NECESSARY**

**U.S. Census**—Two or more persons sharing a household and who are related by blood, marriage, or adoption (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998).
Data gathered by the U.S. Census is used in a multitude of ways. Business institutions focus on these households as consuming units, further categorizing them into socioeconomic, cultural, age-specific, and other target market groups. Financial analysts use these data to forecast the economic health of the country. Social scientists apply these data to the analysis of behavioral shifts and actual or possible impacts of such changes.
Public Opinion—Surveys administered to the general public collect information about behaviors and configurations of family units that are then presented as being acceptable or deemed to be normal in that particular society. Depending on the scientific rigor used in the creation of the instruments used in these polls, results may be generalized to the larger population or may be biased and unreliable.

Policy-Specific Definitions

The Legal System—The legal definition of a family has become much more flexible and nonspecific and not limited to people linked by legal marriage, blood, or adoption. Judges use these criteria: common residence, economic interdependency, stability, and commitment (Scanzoni & Marsiglio, 1993).

Based on the functional and psychological qualities of the relationship: The “exclusivity and longevity” of relationship; the “level of emotional and financial commitment”; the “reliance placed upon one another for daily family services”; and how the members “conducted their everyday lives and held themselves out to society.” (New York Supreme Court; see Gutis, 1989)

Life Insurance

Employers offering life insurance in the benefits package will usually limit coverage of an employee’s family members by defining such terms as spouse and child:

A spouse is a husband or wife, as recognized under the laws of the state of Nebraska. He/she is a common-law spouse if the common-law marriage was contracted in a jurisdiction recognizing a common-law marriage. A child is defined as a natural-born or legally adopted child who has not reached the limiting age of 19. A stepchild is one who is living in the employee’s home and is chiefly dependent on the employee for support, and who has not reached the limiting age of 19. A child is one for whom the employee has “legal guardianship” and who has not reached the limiting age of 19. Appropriate documentation must be provided to verify the court appointed “legal guardian” status. (University of Nebraska Benefits, 2006)

The Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA)

Employees working for qualifying employers have the legal right to take unpaid leave to care for infants, ill children, spouses, and parents, and new parental time with adopted or foster children under this law. The following definitions illuminate qualifying situations.
• birth and care of a newborn child
• placement with the employee of a child for adoption or foster care and to care for the newly placed child
• care for an immediate family member (spouse, child, or parent—but not a parent in-law) with a serious health condition. (The Family and Medical Leave Act: AFSCME’s Comprehensive Guide, 2007).

Social Security Survivor Benefits

To determine eligibility for someone to begin receiving these benefits, the following documentation is necessary on application:

• your marriage certificate if you are a widow or widower
• your divorce papers if you are applying as a surviving divorced spouse
• dependent children’s Social Security numbers, if available

U.S. Income Tax/Internal Revenue Service

To determine tax liability, U.S. citizens file annual tax returns. The terms used in this process are defined by accompanying literature. A Head of Household is an unmarried person who pays over one half the cost of keeping up a home for a qualifying person, such as a child that lived with you or your parent whom you can claim as a dependent. A dependent—There are five tests that must be met for a person to qualify as another’s dependent:

1. The Relationship Test. The person must either be a relative or have lived in your home as a family member all year.
2. Joint Return Test. If the person is married, he or she cannot file a joint return with another person.
3. Citizen or Resident Test. The person must be a U.S. citizen or resident alien, or a resident of Canada or Mexico. There is an exception for certain adopted children.
4. Income Test. The person’s gross income must be less than $3,000. However, your child’s gross income can be $3,000 or more if he or she was either under age 19 at the end of the year or under age 24 and a student.
5. Support Test. You must have provided over half of the person’s total support in 2002. Two exceptions to this test are children of divorced or separated parents and persons supported by two or more taxpayers. As taxpayers complete the reporting forms, it is important that they understand the implications of how they define their family and how their family functions as an economic unit during the year. (www.irs.gov)
THE GRAY AREAS

Other definitions of family tend to be influenced by social factors. Family definitions that include cohabitation and domestic partnerships may be seen as gray areas by some, but are becoming more socially accepted, and these families are often granted “family” legal rights.

Cohabitation is defined as two unrelated adults of the opposite sex sharing the same living quarters. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998)

Despite the concerns, it has gained widespread social acceptance over the past 30 years. Current legal debate has centered on Domestic Partners entitled to legal rights and/or employee benefits. Loosely, two people who have chosen to share one another’s lives in an intimate and committed relationship, live together, and be jointly responsible for basic living expenses qualify for such programs in states that recognize this designation. Federal regulations have permitted unmarried low-income heterosexual and homosexual couples to qualify as “families” to utilize public housing (Bishop, 1989).

Yorburg (2002) defines families as groups related by marriage, birth, adoption, or mutual definition. According to this definition, when people define themselves as a family, they essentially are a family. Within that mutual definition are elements of emotional involvement and identity attachment that connect individuals at the present time and create a need for continuation or maintenance of that family unit over time. This maintenance function requires acquisition and utilization of resources.

Changes in the Family

Yorburg (2002) proposes that families in industrial societies are experiencing dramatic changes in many dimensions, most obviously in terms of forms, functions, expectations, and values. Changes in demography mark the contemporary family. These represent the changes to the various forms or configurations of families today. The U.S. Census Bureau (2002) reported that married-couple households represented 56% of families in 1990, but dropped to 53% in 2000. Other demographics point to changes
as well. The 2001 Census data reveal an increase in median age at first marriage, a decrease in the average size of the nation’s households, and an increase in the number of persons living alone (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Although some may see these changes as a lack of commitment to the family, others suggest that these changes reveal caution. Individuals may be waiting for marriage or finding alternatives to marriage in an effort to avoid failure.

Changes in family expectations serve to alter the emphasis of the family within society. DeGenova and Rice (2002) point to changes in the way individuals view the family. They suggest that today the family is fulfilling more of an expressive role by meeting personal needs, such as emotional security and companionship, rather than solely fulfilling the traditional role of the family as an institution that meets the needs of society. Coontz (1992) found that only 22% of those polled in 1989 defined a family solely in terms of blood, marriage, or adoption. In contrast, 74% agreed to a definition that identified the family as any group of people who love and care for one another.

The National Marriage Project (2001) found that the institution of marriage has also changed. This project recognizes that marriage contributes to the social health of our nation and that most Americans still desire that type of relationship. Using data from 1960 to 2000, this project sought to find the indicators of the social health of marriage in America and identified the following key findings:

- Young adults today are searching for a deep emotional and spiritual connection with one person for life. At the same time, the bases for marriage as a religious, economic, or parental partnership are receding in importance for many men and women in their 20s. Taken together, the survey findings present a portrait of marriage as emotionally deep and socially shallow. (p. 6)

- Marriage trends in the United States in recent decades indicate that Americans have become less likely to marry, and that fewer of those who do marry have marriages they consider to be “very happy.” (p. 18)

- The American divorce rate today is more than twice that of 1960, but has declined slightly since hitting the highest point in our history in the early 1980s. (p. 21)

- The number of unmarried couples has increased dramatically over the past four decades. Most young Americans now spend some time living together outside of marriage. (p. 22)

- The presence of children in America has declined significantly since 1960, as measured by fertility rates and the percentage of households with children. Other indicators suggest that this decline has reduced the child-centeredness of our nation and contributed to the weakening of the institution of marriage. (p. 24)
• The percentage of children who grow up in fragile—typically fatherless—families has grown enormously over the past four decades. This phenomenon is mainly due to increases in divorce, out-of-wedlock births, and unmarried cohabitation. (p. 26)

• Surveys of teen attitudes over the past few decades point up a growing disparity. Teenagers’ desire for a long-term marriage has increased, especially for boys, but girls have become more pessimistic about ever being able to have such a marriage. Both boys and girls have become much more accepting of the alternatives to marriage. (p. 30)

Although many changes have taken place and the family may be difficult to define, the concept of family is an integral part of the fabric of American culture. Policymakers, educators, and service providers acknowledge the importance of the family as the core to individual well-being and growth.

In The News

The American family has been at the core of many media productions—radio, TV, movies, and even music videos. The family has been portrayed as comical, cynical, dysfunctional, and even macabre. The public is easily drawn to these odd, yet interesting, imaginary families. So much so that when these shows are discontinued, viewers mourn their loss as if the characters are real, not imaginary, friends.

Growing Pains, a family sitcom ran from 1985 to 1992. Viewers became so attached to the Seavers that two full-length movies have been made since the show's departure from prime time more than 15 years ago. The movies’ writers attempt to continue the original storyline while explaining and allowing the cast members and their characters interesting adult experiences. www.abc.com

The Simpsons, one of the most successful and critically acclaimed TV shows of all time, has built its reputation around the bizarre interpretation of real-life family and social issues. As an animated series on FOX, none of the characters is required to age, allowing the pseudo-middle-American family great freedom of interpretation of current social issues through the last two decades. www.thesimpsons.com/index.html

Family Guy, another hit from FOX network, lacks blue hair and the radioactivity of Springfield, USA, but packs a punch with quirky characters of its own. Stewie, the unnaturally mature baby, has his own unique, perverted perspective of family life. His older siblings provide insight into the world of adolescence, and his mother and father struggle with all of the day-to-day problems that parents face. www.familyguy.com/

The Addams Family debuted in 1964 as a weekly prime-time, comical, yet dark, production. Scripts were focused on the traditional family of Gomez, his wife Morticia, (Continued)
and their two young children, Pugsley and Wednesday. Living with this family in the frightening mansion were Uncle Fester, Grandmama, Cousin Itt, and Thing, under the faithful care of the butler, Lurch. This family unit became so beloved and well known that even though the original series only lasted for 2 years, subsequent animated series based on these characters and full-length movies brought them back to life again and again. They have most recently been on TV advertising the dark chocolate version of the popular candy M&Ms (www.abc.com).

The list of old and new media hits based on “the family” is long. What makes viewers so anxious to follow the escapades of imaginary families? Some might say that it is an attempt to make sense of their own. Others might suggest that it is an attempt to escape their own, if only for a few minutes each week.

Family Functions

Perhaps it would also be beneficial to look at the various structures of the family and concentrate on the critical functions of the family. As noted earlier, families provide the individual with a sense of belonging and emotional security, as well as to provide for their physical needs. The family is the most basic economic unit in society and is responsible for reproduction. The family is also the principal component in the socialization process. It is in the family setting that a child learns his or her place in society, as well as the roles and behaviors that give him or her status in that society.

In the past, one of the most popular theories about family was the structural-functional theory. This theory views individuals as members of many interrelated systems, one of which is the family. Parsons (1968), one of the creators of this theory, believed that four basic functions were necessary for any system to survive. These functions help to explain functions that families perform and that have caused the family to continue throughout history. These functions are latent pattern maintenance or loyalty, adaptation or ability to adjust to change, integration of members, and goal attainment or the ability to mobilize resources. This theory has been criticized for its patriarchal views, as well as for not being able to explain the differences between culture and ethnicity (Aulette, 2002).

Mitchell (1984) suggested that families provide four activities or functions: production (producing or purchasing food and shelter, preparing
workers to earn wages, and consumption of goods and services), reproduction (bearing and raising children), socialization (teaching the rules of society), and sexuality (“legitimate” sexual activity).

Although some social scientists have acknowledged that many families have lost some of the functions of previous generations, such as growing their own food and educating their own children, they generally agree on three basic functions (Lamanna & Riedmann, 2003): responsible reproduction, economic support, and emotional security. Reproduction, meaning bearing and raising children, has been largely the responsibility of the family. Although the family is no longer self-sufficient in the production of goods, the family is responsible to meet the basic economic needs (food, clothing, and shelter) of its members. In addition, families can provide individuals with an important source of emotional support that includes affection and companionship. Identification of the functions of families describes the family by defining the work of families.

### Families Within Cultural Contexts

Photo 2.1  Family diversity brings multiple cultures together.

*Source: © lijlexmom/istockphoto*
Arranged marriage is a common practice in many Indian cultures, yet among non-Indians in the United States, it is widely misunderstood. Vani is a university undergraduate student who moved to the United States with her parents 10 years ago. Her family operates a retail business, and she is an education major. Vani was anxious to share marriage customs from her homeland.

**Interviewer:** Are you considering an arranged marriage when it is time?

**Vani:** It is very likely. My parents want me to return to India when it is time to begin looking for marriage. We visit about once a year, and family members who remain there would help me through the process.

**Interviewer:** Can you describe that process?

**Vani:** Most marriages where I come from are “arranged”; that is to say, the parents choose their children’s mate. A key point is making sure that the mate is from the appropriate caste and is able to pay the dowry price.

**Interviewer:** What is a dowry?

**Vani:** Dowry is the payment in cash or kind by the bride’s family to the groom’s family when they give the bride away. The bride’s family can give land, jewelry, and/or money as the gift.

**Interviewer:** Dowry is a very unfamiliar concept for many. Having lived in the United States, do you still think the dowry system is a good idea?

**Vani:** The Hindu religion is more likely to practice the dowry system, so it has religious history in my family. This practice has been responsible for many crimes against women in India, including domestic violence, bride burning, and wife murder. But my family and the families from our area are not as violent.

**Interviewer:** What purpose does a dowry serve?

**Vani:** There are three purposes. First, it is like a gift from the bride’s family to the groom’s, a friendship bond. Second, it is a means of compensating the groom and his family for taking on the economic burden of the bride. Third, it is a premortem inheritance for the bride.

**Interviewer:** You mean, it is like a life insurance policy. If the groom dies, the bride will get that back?
Vani: Maybe not exactly the same things back, but she will be assured some assets if her husband dies.

Interviewer: Let’s get back to the “arranged” part of arranged marriage.

Vani: My friends in the United States have a real problem with that concept. I think people have the idea that parents find a girl for their son, and that the two never meet until their wedding day—that they have to take whatever they are given. That rarely happens. Those types of arranged marriages may still happen in smaller, conservative communities, but it’s not likely.

Interviewer: How do you think your marriage will be arranged? What is the process?

Vani: Don’t get me wrong. Some couples in India marry for love, but most are arranged. Since I am here, going to school, my family back in India will look for a possible husband for me. They talk to people—uncles, cousins, neighbors—and find out if anyone knows of a suitable man. Eventually someone will say, “My friend’s brother has a son….” The girl’s side always takes the first steps, making everyone aware that they have a marriageable female family member. When a family has a possible husband, they will ask questions and get information to help them decide if I might be good for him.

Interviewer: So if they think you are a possible match, what happens?

Vani: We will meet. If we like each other, arrangements will start.

Interviewer: You have seen your U.S. friends date. What do you think of dating?

Vani: I think it is a lot of bother. My friends seem to be attracted to guys for the wrong reasons—cars, clothes, looks.

Interviewer: How quickly do marriage arrangements happen?

Vani: Maybe half a year. During that time, sometimes, the couple finds out they are not compatible. They can stop the process when that happens. They get together a few times, not overly much. Maybe two times a month, minimum.

Interviewer: What about divorce?

(Continued)
Families exist within the cultural contexts of race, ethnicity, religion, politics, and economics. These frameworks impact the way individuals and families define and evaluate their relationships. As the global community continues to evolve, it is important to recognize, understand, and be responsive to cultural differences between and among cultural groups.

Families pass learned behaviors and experiences, or a cultural heritage, from generation to generation (Johnson, 1998). Drawing from the worldview framework introduced in chapter 1, the values held by cultural groups are expressed in unique patterns through formation and perpetuation of family units. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) propose that the three primary cultural expressions of group membership are lineal, collaborative, and individualistic. Family units within these cultural groups reflect the orientation of the larger social group. For instance, Native-American families reflect stronger lineal relationships, often defining family membership from a clan or group of related families (Johnson, 1998). However, few cultural groups will fit neatly into any one of the three orientations. Although many Native Americans may have a more developed awareness of their tribal membership (lineal), the basic functions of these tribes have historically been collaborative in nature.
The African-American family has been the focus of numerous studies. Murry (2000) states, “just as black families are different from white families, black families are also different from each other” (p. 336). Peters and Massey (1983) suggest that when studying situations and coping models about African-American families, we must understand that the experiences of these families continue to be influenced by racism and that the existence of that social condition requires extraordinary efforts of African-American families to lead ordinary lives.

Demographic information illuminates a few unique family structural differences within the contemporary African-American family. A larger proportion of African-American families are headed by single parents (Murry, 2000). Norton and Moorman (1987) report that, although 9 out of 10 White women can expect to marry within their lifetimes, fewer than 3 out of 4 African-American women can expect the same. These emerging patterns could further impact the family experiences or the cultural heritage of future generations.

As cultural groups coexist within a larger society, individuals from different racial, ethnic, and religious groups begin drawing life partners from distinctly different cultural groups. Interracial marriages include the joining together of individuals from the White, African-American, Asian, or Native-American races with someone from outside their race. In comparison to all marriages, interracial marriages have increased from .7% in 1970 to just over 5% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2006). Interethnic marriages consist of partners who marry within their ethnic groups, such as unions between Hispanic groups or between Asian groups.

Although religious homogamy is still prevalent, interfaith marriages are increasing in the United States and have an influence on the economic and demographic characteristics of families (Lehrer, 1998). Adler (1997) reported that 15% to 20% of marriages represent differing religious preferences between spouses. Still others switch to their partner’s religion, or the couple chooses a new religion to practice. Religious homogamy is not as frequent as racial and ethnic homogamy in marital statistics; however, it is an important factor within some marriages. Religious orientations often affect decisions about money, children, social networks, and relationship issues.

Researching the Family

Those who study the family recognize that the field is diverse. Not only are there many structural variations that describe families and numerous ways of defining the family, but there are many ways to explain how families function and operate in society. Formal theory involves a set of propositions that can be tested or proved to explain a phenomenon in society such as the family. Borrowing from various fields of study, family theory depends
on multiple theoretical perspectives or conceptual frameworks. Some of
these involve scientific explanations, whereas others are based on personal
experience and observation. All seek to understand the family.

There are several reasons that it is necessary to examine the theoretical
perspectives of families. These perspectives help explain the “why” or
“how” families work. They help us to make sense of how families behave.
This information is helpful to those who assist families as well as those
who guide policy that affects families. Theory also provides structure for
future studies—a place to start when looking for answers. They give the
researcher a guide for his or her inquiry.

At this point, it becomes important to explore eight theoretical per-
spectives that help in understanding families. Particular attention is given
to how these perspectives relate to family resource management.

**FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY**

The family systems theory (also referred to as the family systems frame-
work) is a popular perspective among professionals who work with fami-
lies. This theory grew out of the general systems theory developed by
Bertalanffy (1969) in the 1960s from the science field. Several components
of this theory are distinctly applicable to the family as a system. According
to the family systems theory, when something occurs to one family mem-
ber, all members of that family are affected. It is assumed that the members
are part of the group or system and function as a system. Family therapists
find this theory especially helpful in working with individual family mem-
bers, and their treatment may need to include the whole family.

Charles and Bonnie have always enjoyed the finer things of life, and
throughout their married life rationalized their need for expensive cloth-
ing, fine dining, and a lavish lifestyle. They frequently spent more than
their income to support their habits, not being able to build savings or
retirement as a safety net for the future. For Charles, this way of living was
a model that he saw from his own parents. When Bonnie, who grew up
in a very poor family, met Charles, she was enamored by the lifestyle and
quickly adopted his principles of the “good life.” Although they recog-
nized that their way of living was probably not responsible, they were
not willing to change. They often remarked “Most people have no idea
how to live!” They knew that others did not approve of their lifestyle but
Charles would announce, “We are not hurting anyone . . . I wish they
would mind their own business!” After a few years, Charles and Bonnie’s
son graduated from college and announced his engagement. The newly-
weds were married in a lavish ceremony and began their new lives in a
beautiful new home in one of the finest areas of town. After a few months,
their son called to tell them that he and his wife were getting a divorce
and that he would have to declare bankruptcy. Charles was shocked and
replied, “How could this happen, you have everything you want?”
This story illustrates the idea that the actions of individuals within a family affect all the family members. Parents model behavior that is passed down from generation to generation unless there is a conscious effort to change. Furnham (1999) suggested that habitual economic behaviors established early may be encouraged by parents or other adults. If Charles and Bonnie's son is ever going to make responsible decisions about his financial future, he will have to make a conscious decision to make changes that will help him to learn new strategies about spending and saving money.

Another aspect within the family systems framework is the assumption that what families do within their units not only impacts other family members, but also impacts their communities.

**SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY**

Family members have individual motivations influencing the behaviors they select. These differences between and among members create situations where personal resources can be bartered or exchanged to further one's self-interests. Exchange theorists explain that families continue to exist because the family group is viewed as a source of rewards for individual members (White & Klein, 2002). Family members bring to the family unit personal resources that can be used to maintain that unit. Infants and children are heavily dependent on the resources of older family members, but will be expected, at some future time, to contribute their own time, energy, and skills to the family's functioning. Adolescent and adult family members may participate in a type of cost-benefit analysis when they feel uncomfortable or unappreciated by other members. The degree of self-sufficiency perceived by individuals will impact their decisions to either leave or stay within the family group.

The exchange framework is often used to study power bases within the family. Obviously, the ability to provide necessary resources to the family unit will increase one's value in that group. Depending on the circumstances or the types of resources necessary at any one time, an individual family member's personal power may increase or decrease. That power base may impact an individual's role in the decision-making process. When a parent has the money and ability to make a purchase contract, he or she will have more actual power in the decision process for buying a teenager an automobile. Regardless of whether he or she exercises that power will depend on the family's communication process and the history of that particular child—parent relationship.

Application of the exchange theory also emerges in the study of courtship, mate selection, and implementation of the decision-making process across family life situations. By the end of the 1970s, exchange theory had become one of the most widely used theoretical frameworks in family research (Edleson & Tan, 1993).
Monty and Frank are brothers in their mid-40s. After the death of their father, Bill, they jointly inherited the family farming operation. Monty is married with three children. Frank is single and has no children. Their mother is to receive an annual living allowance from their operational profits. This change of ownership has created a great deal of stress between the brothers and between Monty’s wife and her mother-in-law. They decided to bring the conflicting issues before their lawyer for advice.

“I know Bill meant well,” Monty’s wife offered, “but we have children to support and Frank is single. Surely he didn’t mean for his grandchildren to go without at the expense of their uncle.”

“Having children was a choice you and Monty made.” Her mother-in-law responded. “We wanted our hard-earned estate to be equally divided between the two boys.”

“How does this inheritance continue, then?” asked Monty’s wife. “When Monty and Frank die, is the entire farm operation split equally among our kids?”

Inheritance can be viewed as a set of long-term exchange relationships, linking different generations of the farming family (Kennedy, 1991). Land and earning power are both examples of resources that are used as bargaining capital in the exchange process within families. Historically, this division of farming lands among surviving heirs seriously compromised the ability of farm families to make a living on shrinking pieces of land. Much of what used to be family farm ground is now part of large corporate-owned business. The increasingly complex legal ramifications of such actions has made the creation of legal wills and trusts a common action of families with inheritance that is to be passed from generation to generation.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

Symbolic interactionism has a long-standing tradition in family theory, tracing back to the early 1900s and continuing to add to the theoretical framework through the last century (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Social and psychological concepts are woven into this conceptual framework. This theoretical perspective looks within families at the process that creates a family unit in the minds of those family members.

Drawing from both qualitative and quantitative research studies, theorists avoid identifying any natural or typical family structure. Instead, families are viewed as unique creations of participants as they spontaneously relate to one another. Interactions of family members, such as talk, gestures, actions, and shared beliefs, create that family’s particular reality. Individuals develop a sense of self through these interactions.
Family identities emerge over time as the family creates rituals and shared meanings or symbols (Bossard & Boll, 1943).

The shared meanings that emerge through interactions and defining of member roles allow the family unit to define situations in unique ways. Behaviors, such as decision-making and resource identification, are based on meanings that group members have created regarding both the situation and possible actions that individuals and family units have available to handle that particular situation (Mead, 1964).

This theory does not ignore the impact of larger social groups on the family unit. Researchers have sought ways to explain how family units and members within families seek to present themselves to others. Turner (1970) refers to this as impression management. As consumers of goods and services, individual within the family unit are aware that choices made will be interpreted by other social groups outside the family and social value judgments will result.

Samuel, a PeeWee baseball player, and his parents are shopping for shoes to wear during practices and games. Prices range from $20 to $120 in his size range. “I've got to have those white ones on the top shelf. My favorite professional baseball player talks about them on television and Bobby said he was going to get them, too.” “But those are twice as much as these,” his father counters, pointing to a similar looking pair on a lower shelf. What are the odds that Samuel will walk out of the store with the more expensive shoes?

Shoes are shoes. Why is it that some consumers will pay higher prices for athletic shoes that are similar in construction to less expensive choices merely for an athlete’s endorsement or a company’s insignia? Building on the symbolic interactionist theory, Laverie, Kleine, and Schultz (2002) explored how and when consumption and products purchased impact a person’s self-identity or “how products make the person. The results of this study found that not only do the actual possessions (apparel and equipment used during athletic activities) lead to more positive self-evaluations, but social ties and the media promotion of those products also enhance the owner’s feeling of self-definition. A contemporary term, conspicuous consumption, is used to describe situations that result from purposeful selection of products to create an image of the self when judged by others. Designer labels, expensive automobiles with identifying symbols, and even specially bred pets are examples of this concept.

The media’s advertising implications and peer pressure may have a significant impact on Samuel’s ultimate possession of new baseball shoes. The process utilized by his parents to decide which shoes to buy will include the possible impact of this purchase on young Samuel’s self-identity, as well as the reflection such a purchase will have on the entire family as
decision-making criteria. Prioritizing such criteria will determine the ultimate impact such factors will have on the shoes selected.

CONFLICT THEORY

Although the conflict theory surfaced as a popular framework in the 1960s, its roots are in the 19th-century works of Karl Marx (Marx & Engels, 1967). Marx revolutionized the way human society was viewed, focusing on the negative impact of the European Industrial Revolution. He felt that the capitalistic environment encouraged the exploitation of the workers. To combat this, he purported that when those being oppressed join forces and challenge their oppressors, conditions can be changed.

Conflict theorists agree that conflict is natural and expected in human interaction. Family units are no different than other organized groups in this respect. There are unequal power bases within each family, resulting in situations of competition, coercion, and conflict.

Conflict theory can be analyzed through three central themes: (a) Humans are driven to want and to seek certain things, (b) power is at the core of all social relationships, and (c) groups have self-interests that they use to advance their own goals, rather than those important to the entire society. Thus, families are social institutions where some members benefit more than others from the existence and maintenance of the family unit. Marriage is often viewed as a relationship ripe with inequality, subordination, and male dominance. Other family situations that are often studied from this framework are domestic violence, divorce, and single parenting.

Application of conflict theory challenges the presentation of families as stable, harmonious, and peaceful social units. For that reason, many researchers avoided using this framework in family research until society experienced stressful change periods, such as the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the dramatic increase of women in the workplace over the last four decades. It emerged as a major player among theories in the late 1960s, and the body of research since that time has established this framework as a strong base for the study of contemporary family issues. Feminist theory is often considered rooted in basic conflict theory thought.

Marta and Pete are disagreeing about more and more day-to-day parenting decisions concerning their twin daughters. Frequent struggles over power within their personal relationship have ensued since Marta returned to her job after the girls started grade school. Marta had left her flight attendant career when she became pregnant. Pete is beginning to feel that his job as a travel agent is becoming a dead-end endeavor. The advancement of travel arrangement via the Internet has brought about lower commission earnings at his current office. Marta
has been very pleased to be able to supplement his declining earnings with her own paycheck. Recently she has been promoted to a higher level of crew management and received a large raise in pay.

When the girls were exposed to chicken pox at school and had to spend a few days recuperating at home, tension boiled over.

"Pete, can’t you stay home with them and do your work on your computer, here?" Marta pleads when she gets a call for a well-paying flight.

"The girls want you, and you know that they are impossible. You’ve spoiled them rotten," he retorts as he grabs his bag and heads out the door.

"They’re just not used to you being so involved with them," Marta continues, "if you’d just spend more time with them." Pete is already out the door.

When parents are struggling within their own relationship over power issues, how are relationships with their children affected? Lindahl and Malik (1999) found that clashes over power and control in the marriage were associated with diminished support of the children. Mental and physical resources are limited, and when they are channeled into negative discourse, they are unavailable for other tasks. Pete may be trying to regain his earlier power base of breadwinner by forcing Maria to choose between her daughters’ well-being and her job at the economic detriment to the entire family unit.

**FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE**

Although the field of family sociology has been in existence for decades and women’s rights emerged as early as the late 1800s, the study of the family was largely dominated by men. Since the early 1970s, feminists have stressed that the widely used frameworks that describe families are often void of the women’s point of view or experiences.

Gordon (1979) identified three essential themes within the feminist perspective: the “emphasis on women and their experiences; recognition that under existing social arrangements women are subordinated or oppressed; and commitment to ending that unjust subordination” (p. 107). Osmond and Thorne (1993) suggest that, as a result of these themes, a fourth theme has emerged: “attention to gender and gender relations as fundamental to all of social life, including the lives of men as well as those of women” (p. 592).

Although the feminist perspective has gained some popularity in the past few years, there are others who argue that the theory isolates the role of women in relationships and forgets that both genders should have equality within family relationships. There is no doubt that gender plays a large role in family studies or that researchers should take both genders into account.
Charlotte was recently widowed after a long and happy marriage of 48 years. Following the shock of losing the only man she ever loved, she was faced with the overwhelming task of taking care of the financial affairs of the estate. Realizing how helpless his mother felt, John decided to help her sort through the papers. "Where did dad keep all the insurance policies and the statements from your retirement account? Did he have a safety deposit box or did you have a savings account?" Charlotte responded, "I don't know where anything is! Your dad took care of all our finances...I guess he never thought I would need to know. I was only a housewife."

Charlotte is not alone. Many older women have had similar experiences. Macdonald (1995) suggests that the very nature of economics is male-dominated, and thus the two spheres of paid labor market economics and unpaid/informal household economics are separate. In this case, the feminist perspective could help to understand how these two spheres interact and impact each other.

**FAMILY ECOLOGICAL THEORY**

The family ecology theory joins the concepts of human development and family relationships with the structure of family resource management to identify a wide range of problems that families face given the environment in which they live. Bubolz and Sontag (1993) suggest that this theory is particularly useful today because it is not limited to certain groups, and it applies to a wide range of family configurations and cultural backgrounds.

The origin of the ecological theory as it relates to the family began as the ideas of human ecology were being promoted by Haeckel in 1873 (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). According to Haeckel, who was intrigued by Darwin's theories of evolution, there is a link between science or biology and the environment. During this same time, Ellen Swallow Richards announced the beginning of the science of Oekology (derived from the Greek word meaning *household management*) that she described as the "science of living" (Clarke, 1973). Oekology was a way of using scientific principles to improve the lives of families. The name that eventually became associated with this science was *home economics*.

Although the ecological theory does not have a formal set of theoretical propositions, Hawley (1986) put up some general propositions that describe the family within the surrounding ecosystem. Some of the propositions Hawley suggests are that change and growth occur through experiences with the outside systems, new information from the outside causes change to the relationships within the family, and the family is closed to the ecosystem around it to ensure stability.
Sheila and Michelle are cousins and are both single mothers. Their children are the same age, but have responded to the demands of life in very different ways. Michelle reports, “Ben is getting into trouble at school almost every day but I just don’t know what to do. It has upset me so much that I started seeing a therapist. He suggested that I take an antidepressant to help me.” Although Sheila is sympathetic, she doesn’t agree with the way that Michelle is handling her situation. Sheila replies, “Michelle, have you talked to Ben about what is bothering him? Have you met with his teachers? Are you sure that medication will solve this problem? I know that when Ethan gets in trouble, it helps to get all the information I can in order to help him.” Sheila silently wonders if Michelle is making decisions about medications that are based on societal expectations without knowing the consequences to herself and her family. Is Michelle neglecting to address her own physical, emotional, and even spiritual needs?

The ecological theory requires that the whole person within a series of systems—the external environments—is taken into account when a problem is presented. Meyers, Varkey, and Aguirre (2002) found a significant association between these systems and family functioning. In this case, Michelle opts to solve the problem at hand by taking an antidepressant drug instead of examining the various systems involved in her son’s behavior as well as her own.

**FAMILY STRENGTHS**

The focus of the family strengths framework is on what is right rather than what is wrong with families. According to Olson, DeFrain, and Olson (2003), one advantage of this framework is that the focus of study is changed from just solving problems to emphasizing what is working well in that family. Once strengths are identified, a foundation is established for continued growth and change in that family. As a result, strong families can become a model for families that want to succeed.

The strengths perspective can be traced back as early as the 1930s, but Herbert Otto’s work in the 1960s is often credited with building a foundation for the current work in family strengths (Otto, 1962). Within the structure of the family strengths framework, there are six major qualities of a strong or healthy family (Stinnett, 1981; Stinnett, DeFrain, & DeFrain, 1999): commitment to the family, spending enjoyable time together, spiritual well-being, successful management of stress and crisis, positive communication, and showing appreciation and affection to each other. The researchers continue to study family strengths and have found these qualities have been reported by more than 21,000 family members in the United States and more than 25 other countries around the world. Families
everywhere are unique in their own cultures, yet strong families commonly seem to be guided by these basic qualities.

Greg and Cindy are newlyweds. They thought that they had prepared for marriage in every way. They attended premarital sessions, talked to other newlyweds about their experiences, and read several books about marriage. Six months into their marriage, they began to see differences in the way they each wanted to spend money. After realizing this, Cindy said, “This doesn’t change the way I feel about you but I am concerned that when we have children, we will have trouble deciding on how to save for their education, and other expenses.” They began to talk about the origin of these differences and traced many of their ways of thinking back to the models that they saw while growing up. Will Cindy and Greg ever be able to work through this issue in their marriage?

Through the discussions, they started to realize neither one had an inherently flawed idea of money, but that they needed to understand each other’s views and develop financial goals that met the needs of their own newly formed family. DeFrain and Stinnett (2002) identified several propositions of the strengths perspective that are illustrated here. Greg and Cindy were able to look at their own families and identify differences focused on the issue of money. Instead of continuing to disagree and argue about who was right, they focused on the positive by appreciating the values that the other person brought to the discussion. They also used positive communication to discuss ways to change and manage positive growth in this area.

FAMILY DEVELOPMENT THEORY

Of all the theories introduced in this chapter, family development theory is the only one that is solely based on the discipline of family studies. It does not claim to have broader applications to other social groups (White & Klein, 2002). The two major components within this theory are time and history, focusing on the changing social expectations unique to each stage of a family’s existence. Thus, it views the family as a dynamic system. The roots of this theory have moved through three distinctive periods.

Tracing back as far as the American Revolution (1770s), the definition of a family and the life course of individual families were recorded and reflected on. White and Klein (2002) refer to this phase as the descriptive phase of the theory. Shortly after World War II, research on family stress ensued. Within this research, the family unit is described as having social roles and relationships within that change as the family moves through
stages over time. The theory was embraced, and research efforts further solidified it as a major theoretical idea.

Most recently, the family development theory has struggled to maintain a distinctive position in family theory. Proponents have tried to answer criticisms and incorporate new methodologies. Core to this current theoretical framework are the ideas that families are identifiable groups that mature and change as they move through a time continuum. Time is measured in stages. A family stage is an interval of time in which the roles and relationships within the family change in observable ways. The theory works most easily with traditional families—wife, husband, and two children. Considering the current diversity in family constructs, this theory becomes problematic. Even traditional family structures with several children become confusing as the number of stages and the overlapping of stages increase.

Alvin has recently retired from his lifelong career and is making adjustments to his daily schedule. He has spent the last 40 years in a fast-paced, 60-hours-a-week position and has been looking forward to relaxing and pursuing his special interests that have long been postponed. He is also anxious to spend more time with his family and to travel extensively.

Martha, Alvin’s wife of 42 years, has devoted most of her time to managing the home and family and actively volunteers for several charity organizations. She has been anxiously awaiting Alvin’s retirement and looks forward to spending more time with him. As a couple, these two are transitioning from one family stage into the next—retirement. They adjusted to the empty-nest stage years ago.

After 2 weeks, Martha explains to Alvin, as he places his breakfast dishes into the sink, “Let me show you how to load the dishwasher and run it. I’ve been wanting to talk about how you could help me more around the house, anyway.”

Housework was not one of the things Alvin had been planning to add to his new role. “But I already take care of the yard and the car.”

As families move from one stage to the next, roles must be renegotiated. Gupta (1999) studied the effects of transitions in marital status on men’s performance of housework. One conclusion from that study was “with respect to housework time at least, the formation of households with adult partners of the opposite gender remains more to men’s than to women’s advantage” (p. 710). This notion would lead us to believe that Alvin will probably not rise to meet his wife’s new expectations. However, family member roles may be age- and stage-graded (White & Klein, 2002). If the surrounding culture views cleaning as a more acceptable expectation for a retired male than for a working male, Alvin may likely accept these new duties willingly.
The theoretical or conceptual framework utilized in a research project will both enhance and constrain the information collected. All of the theories and perspectives presented in this chapter have a history within the study of families. Each has its strengths and weaknesses. Together they have created a broad, useful knowledge base for family problem solving and understanding.

### Table 2.1 Theory Strengths and Weaknesses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory/Perspective</th>
<th>Strength</th>
<th>Weakness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family systems</td>
<td>Focuses on the interconnectedness of family members and their experiences.</td>
<td>Assumes that all family members are functioning as active participants of the family system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchange</td>
<td>Focuses on individual resources and the bartering of these resources, seeking to explain the power bases within families.</td>
<td>Becomes problematic when analyzing the roles of children in family units.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic interactionism</td>
<td>Combines social and psychological concepts, and views families as uniquely self-created units.</td>
<td>Focuses on the uniqueness of family realities and lessens the generalizability of research findings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>Recognizes that conflict is natural and expected in human interaction.</td>
<td>Challenges the view of families as stable social units.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist</td>
<td>Incorporates women’s views and experiences into the research framework.</td>
<td>Isolates the role of females and ignores male experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family ecological</td>
<td>Links the family experiences to its environment.</td>
<td>Broadens research efforts and raises level of complexity for findings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family strengths</td>
<td>Focuses on emphasizing what is working well for the family rather than problem solving.</td>
<td>Focuses on problem solving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family development</td>
<td>Views the family as a dynamic system.</td>
<td>Becomes difficult with nontraditional family structures.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Questions about how families work lead to research. Research methods are selected to answer these questions and are chosen based on the researcher’s theory preference. Research traditions fall along the lines of either quantitative or qualitative methodology (see Table 2.2). Quantitative methodology is used when quantifiable data are needed to show a measurable correlation between phenomena. One example of a research project that would require a quantitative design involves a researcher who wants to find out whether an increase in single-parent homes has a possible connection to an increase in juvenile delinquency. The researcher would need to have a large sample and collect enough data to show a statistical correlation. In contrast, qualitative methodology is used to develop a deeper understanding about something in which little is known. Qualitative research involves details that are difficult to present in quantitative terms. An example of a qualitative study with families would include describing the complexities of being homelessness (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). This study would involve the researcher conducting interviews and possibly observing the homeless in an effort to understand their lived experiences. Whatever methodology is chosen, the results of research are meant to inform. This new information can then be used to improve education or changes policies in that particular area.

Table 2.2  Family Research Design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quantitative</th>
<th>Qualitative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Data are collected with an instrument</td>
<td>• The researcher is the instrument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The search is for a correlation</td>
<td>• The search is for a pattern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Results are reported using numbers or percentages</td>
<td>• Results are reported using words or description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Findings are generalized</td>
<td>• Findings are centralized, but specialized</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary

The family is one of society’s most basic institutions. Historically, the family has existed for centuries and was organized for economic purposes. Today, the family has changed. Although it is still an organization that depends on economics, family members
Questions for Review and Discussion

1. What is the history of the family?
2. What are some examples that illustrate how the family today is in transition?
3. Why are there so many different definitions of family?
4. How have the functions of the family changed over time?
5. What is the purpose of theory in understanding families?
6. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each family theory?
7. What are the two types of research methodology used in family research? What are the differences between the two?