for work (see Chapter 4). It increases nonstandard work schedules, and it makes for longer work hours for most workers. Political globalization undermines the ability of nation-states and their various governmental agencies to control their own economy, the very nature of their jobs, and the income needed for family maintenance. In this way, globalization threatens family control of its members (Edgar, 2004). It heightens the connections between families and the wider social context. Families, states, and markets are interconnected sites rather than separate spheres (Ferree, 2010:425).

The Myth of the Monolithic Family Form

We all know what the family is supposed to look like. It should resemble the 1950s Ozzie and Harriet form. This uniform image has been imprinted on our brains since childhood, through children’s books, schools, radio, television, movies, and newspapers; through the lectures, if not the examples, of many of our parents; and through the speeches, if not the examples, of many of our politicians. Invariably, the image is of a White, middle-class, heterosexual father as breadwinner, mother as homemaker, and children at home living in a one-family house. This monolithic image of “the normal American family” is a stick against which all families are measured (Pyke, 2000:240). This model represents a small proportion of U.S. households. Less than 10 percent of households consist of married couples with children in which only the husband works. Dual-income families with children made up more than twice as many households. Even families with two incomes and no children outnumber the conventional family.

The mythical model of the typical U.S. family embodies three distinctive features: (1) the family is a nuclear unit; (2) it consists of mother, father, and their children; and (3) it exhibits a gendered division of labor. The first two features are closely related. The nuclear family is separate from society and independent from kin. It consists of a married couple and their children living in a home of their own. The third distinguishing feature of “the family” is its assumed sexual division of labor: “a breadwinner husband, freed for and identified with activities in a separate economic sphere, and a full-time wife and mother whose being is often equated with the family itself” (Thorne, 1992:7).

Although this family type now represents a small minority of U.S. families, major social and cultural forces continue to assume this singular form. In reality, “this is an age of increasing family diversity” (Marks, 2006:62). It now makes more sense to talk about “types of families” (Mabry et al., 2004:93). Contemporary family types represent a multitude of family formations including single-parent households, stepparent families, extended multigenerational households, gay and straight cohabiting couples, child-free couples, transnational families, multiracial families, lone householders with ties to various families, and many other kinds of families (see Box 1.1). The tension between this diverse array of family groupings and the idealized 1950s family creates disagreement about what makes up families. The question of what constitutes a family, where its boundaries are drawn, and who does or does not belong to it at any point in time triggers many more questions. In fact, there is no consensus among social agencies, professionals, and ordinary people on what currently constitutes a family (Aerts, 1993:7; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2004:449; Gittins, 2011).

One way of moving beyond the distortions in the monolithic model is to distinguish between families and households. Family refers to a set of social relationships, while household refers to residence or living arrangements (Jarrett and Burton, 1999; Rapp, 1982). To put it another way, a family is a kinship group, whereas a household is a residence group that carries out domestic functions (Holstein and Gubrium, 1999:31). One good example of the importance of distinguishing between family and household is the restructuring of family obligations and household
Emergent Family Trends

Families of the Future

In the latter part of the twentieth century, social and demographic changes have altered the family more dramatically than in any comparable span of time in our history (Furstenberg, 2011:192). How will the family change in the twenty-first century? What will families look like? Recent trends suggest increasing complexity of family life in the United States. Sociologist Webb J. Farrell (2005: 101) suggests the following about families of the near future:

- At least one-half of all children will spend at least one-quarter of their lives in female-headed households.
- The new families will experience severely limited economic growth and growth opportunities.
- The new families will be characterized by a semi-extended family form made up of fictive kin with some ties to the family members’ original homelands.
- The new families will more than likely live in households that have two primary languages for at least two generations.
- The new families will involve a recognition of sexually variant relatives and/or parents.
- The new families will consist primarily of people of color.

Composition after divorce (Ferree, 1991:107). Family members do not always live in the same households. When separation and divorce break the bonds between mother and father, bonds between children and parents can remain intact. Another example is the migration of family members from one part of the world to another. In transnational families, family members are spread across national boundaries with a pattern of moving back and forth between countries. In today’s world, more and more families extend across two or more households, generations, marital and legal statuses, blood ties, and even continents! People may live apart and still be in the same family. Therefore, household and family may overlap, but they are not the same thing. People may share a household and not consider themselves a family, and people may feel like a family while not living together (Bridenthal, 1981:48). (See Figure 1.1 on changes in households between 1970 and 2005.)

Although family relations and household arrangements today are more varied than at any time in history, diversity is not new. Throughout history, major social forces have created a wide range of family configurations. Today, the changes most responsible for the proliferation of family types are: (1) global forces causing families and their members to cross geographic, social, and cultural borders in search of employment; (2) women’s unprecedented participation in the labor force; (3) new patterns in marriage and divorce; and (4) a decline in the number of children women bear. These developments have added to the emergence of new family types.

Perhaps the most striking change in the national profile of families is the rise in mother-only households and the poverty that often accompanies them. The vast majority of single-parent households are maintained by mothers. Patterns of gender inequality in the larger society contribute to “the feminization of poverty,” the growing impoverishment of women (and their children) in U.S. society. Many children will not experience the idealized two-parent household during major portions of their childhood years. Less than 50 percent of children in the United States live in “traditional nuclear families” that have two biological parents married to each other, full-blown siblings only, and no other household members (Demo et al., 2005).

A growing trend toward the maintenance of households by persons living alone or with others to whom they are not related has also contributed to a greater variety of living arrangements. Factors contributing to the surge of nonfamily households include the increased tendency of young adults to move away from home at an early age, postponement of marriage, the continued high rate of divorce, and increasing numbers of elderly persons living alone.

Economic forces are creating other changes as well. For example, many households composed of two generations as adult children, face low-paying jobs, high college and/or credit-card debts, resulting in the children moving back in with their parents. Twenty-nine percent of young adults between the ages of 15 and 34 have moved back in temporarily with their parents (Mintz, 2012). (See Box 1.2.)
Demographic shifts in the racial and ethnic balance of the population are also transforming U.S. family patterns. At the beginning of the twentieth century, fewer than one in five Americans belonged to a racial or an ethnic minority. Today, racial ethnic groups make up one-fourth of the U.S. population. They will account for one-third of the population in the year 2030. Some of the most significant differences between various minority groups and dominant groups involve variations in family and household structure (Schwede et al., 2005). As the United States grows ever more diverse in racial and ethnic composition, family diversity will remain evident.

**Box 1.2**

**Moving Back With Mom and Dad**

The economic downturn that began in 2007 will affect families for some time to come. Economic conditions have produced an increase of young, primarily, middle-class adults returning to live with their parents after being away to college or having lived independently.

Among people aged 18 to 24, almost two-thirds of men (60 percent) and half of women live with their parents (U.S. Census Bureau). “These boomeranged adults are a generation facing an historic transformation in route to a successful job and family life” (Mintz, 2012). In the 1950s and 1960s, the pattern was to finish school and then leave the family of origin. Leaving the childhood home was an important and inevitable rite of passage for young adults. Owning a house and starting a nuclear family was their dream. “Failure to launch” was a social disgrace. Today’s economic conditions have changed patterns of how and when people form families. Moving back home for financial reasons often comes before living independently or marrying. This sequence is no longer a stigma.

Is this trend a good thing or a bad thing? Will young people unused to struggle return to the immature dependence of childhood with free food and laundry service? Or, will moving back in with mom and dad provide a gradual transition to successful adulthood in today’s economy? Some family experts say that pulling in a household to survive may make young adults more responsible—like the frugal and self-reliant Depression era generation. What do you think?
Images, Ideals, and Myths

One type of family—made up of U.S.-born Whites—is becoming less dominant, and the future characteristics of the family will increasingly be influenced by what immigrant and minority families look like and do (Lichter and Qian, 2004:2; Marks, 2006) (see Chapter 4). Race and class are important structural factors underlying the diversity of family forms.

Research confirms that the United States has never had one distinct family form. What emerges when we refer to the U.S. family is a vast array of possible families (Elliott and Umberson, 2004:34). This has led some social scientists to conclude that “the American family” does not exist:

The first thing to remember about the American family is that it doesn’t exist. Families exist. All kinds of families in all kinds of economic and marital situations, as all of us can see. . . . The American family? Just which American family did you have in mind? Black or white, large or small, wealthy or poor, or somewhere in between? Did you mean a father-headed, mother-headed, or childless family? First or second time around? Happy or miserable? Your family or mine? (Howe, 1972:11)

The Myth of a Unified Family Experience

Partly because we glorify the family, we assume that family members experience the family in the same way—that family and individuals are merged and that they have common needs, common experiences, and common meanings. This conception of “the family” as a unified group is a “glued together family” (Sen, 1983, cited in Ferrer, 1991), treated as if it were a single unit with a single set of interests.

New research challenges romantic assumptions about family and household unity, showing that women, men, and children experience their families in different ways. The best way to understand “within-family difference” is to “decompose” the family—that is, to break it down into its essential components (Mitchell, 1966). Two key components of all families are the gender system and the age system. These two systems produce different realities for men and women as well as for children and adults. These systems shape every activity that has to do with daily family living, such as the division of household labor, leisure activities, the giving and receiving of nurturance and emotional support, decisions about consumption, and employment. In addition, age and gender often produce different and conflicting interests among family members. This means that mothers, fathers, and children experience family life from different vantage points (Hertz and Marshall, 2001:2) (See Box 1.3.)

Jessie Bernard’s classic work on marriage revealed that every marital union actually contains two marriages—his and hers—and that the two do not always coincide (Bernard, 1971). Researchers who ask husbands and wives identical questions about their marriages often get quite different replies, even to fairly simple, factual questions. The family as a gendered institution (Acker, 1992) is one of the most important themes in family research. There are gender differences in every aspect of family living, including decision making, household division of labor, and forms of intimacy and sexuality. Similarly, divorce affects female and male family members differently. Girls and boys experience their childhoods differently as there are different expectations, different rules, and different punishments according to gender. Patriarchy is the term used to refer to social relations in which men are dominant over women. Patriarchy in the larger society gives shape to a family system in which men are accorded more prestige and more privileges and in which they wield greater power.

Knowing that family experiences vary by gender, we can better understand the problems associated with the image of the family as a harbor from life’s storms.
The family is idealized as a personal retreat, yet for most women it is a workplace, a place of domestic labor and child care. For whom, then, is the home a refuge—a nurturant haven? Barrie Thorne has provided the following answer:

For the vast majority of women, the home is a place of considerable work, even when they are employed full-time out of the home. Researchers have found—that women work in and out of the home an average of fifteen hours more than men each week, which adds up to an extra month of twenty-four-hour days a year. (Thorne, 1992:18)

Caring for families and caring about them is strongly gendered. Carework is considered women’s work and is undervalued. Adult women are providers of care but less likely to be recipients of such care. Far more than men, women are the caretakers and the caregivers that maintain family bonds (Aldous, 1991:661; Rivas, 2011:183). A full understanding of family life requires that we attend to different experiences, different voices, and multiple family realities.

The Myth of Family Consensus

The idealized picture of family life is flawed in still another way. It assumes that families are based on “companionate” or “consensual” relations—in other words, on a harmony of interest among family members. This myth neglects a fundamental family paradox. Family life can be contentious due to the following conditions: (1) power relations within the family; (2) competitive aspects of family relations; (3) new patterns of work and leisure, which lead to different activities for family members; and (4) the intense emotional quality of family life.

In the fast-changing global economy, individuals depend on love and marriage to meet their interpersonal needs. Today’s married partners expect more intimacy and support from each other than from anyone else. This puts great strains on marriage. And families seeking closeness between parents and children are also under strain when expectations of love are not met (Coontz, 2010; Coleman, 2010). The reality is that people do not always find nurturance and support in their families. Like workplaces and other social arenas, families are themselves sites of negotiation, exchange, power, conflict, and inequality (Cohen and MacCartney,
“My family likes to set up our grudges at Thanksgiving, stew over them through December, then take our revenge at Christmas.”

(2004:186). Behind closed doors, the other face of the family may be the opposite of the myth. In marriage, for example, the political reality of husband–wife relationships is evident in household division of labor, in family decision making, and “in extreme form in incidents of wife abuse” (Thorne, 1982:13). Parents’ disproportionate power over their offspring produces family strains at all social levels.

Recognizing the political underpinnings of family life does not discount the solidarity and support found within the family realm. Families are sites of deep contradictions. Disagreement, competition, and conflict can coexist with order, stability, and cooperation (Mabry et al., 2004:95). Love and conflict often become entangled, creating an “arena of struggle” between family members (Hartmann, 1981).

Although we commonly romanticize the family as a place where all is shared and where nobody measures, research reveals that money matters are a common source of family strife (Funderberg, 2003). Families can display the same hard traits of the market. Money is used, often unconsciously, to control children, punish estranged spouses, measure a parent’s true feelings for us, buy freedom from relationships, or stop a partner from leaving. And in the family as in the workplace, there is a system of exchange with accounting and punishment for not performing as expected. But because of our image of the family as a place of love and sharing, we underestimate common conflicts and rivalries (Millman, 1991:9).

The emotional quality of family life can produce deep ambivalence because emotional relationships inevitably contain negative as well as positive feelings. This
combination of love and antagonism sets intimate relationships apart from less intimate ones. Therefore, ambiguity is an integral part of family experience.

Because intimate relationships are intense, they can create a cauldron-like setting, one that is “overheated by its exclusiveness, specialization, and uniqueness” (Tuft and Meyerhoff, 1979:17). The family may then become less a refuge and more like a prison from which growing numbers of “refugees” (runaway children, permanently defecting adolescents, wives, and husbands) seek escape. Closeness, privacy, and intimacy can also create disorder and distance among family members.

Families may provide emotional support and nurturing for their members, but they may also inspire violence and brutality. Many family specialists argue that it would be hard to find a group or institution in U.S. society in which violence is more of an everyday occurrence than within the family. For example, most murder cases involve relatives or people involved in some intimate way. Violence is not found in all families, but there is an emotional dynamic to family life that can generate violence (see Chapter 11). We must acknowledge this fact if we are to understand the complexity of families in our society.

Family life is fraught with disparities. Families may provide emotional support for some family members but not for others. Or the support derived from the family may vary by age and gender. Some family members may derive support at great cost to others in the family. In addition, new patterns of work and leisure mean that family members are developing interests and activities that are different from other members of their families. In many cases, this leads to conflicting interests and expectations rather than convergence and mutual support. As a result, the companionship function of families comes under increasing stress (Coates, 2003:197).

Families are paradoxical. They may provide support for their members, but that support is neither uniform nor always present. Lillian Rubin has captured well the duality of family experience: “The family as an institution is both oppressive and protective and, depending on the issue, is experienced sometimes one way, sometimes the other—often in some mix of the two by most people who live in families” (Rubin, 1976:6).

The Myth of Family Decline as the Cause of Social Problems

Partly because of the myths about the past, and partly because the family has changed so much in the last few decades, many social analysts conclude that the “breakdown of the family” is responsible for many societal ills.

Each day, the media serve up new stories and statistics documenting that marriage is going the way of the horse and buggy, that we are becoming a nation without fathers and that, as a result, children are suffering and society is falling apart. The breakdown of the family is taken for granted as a simple social fact. The only question is who or what is to blame and how can we restore the family to the way we imagine it used to be. (Mason et al., 1998:1)

In recent years, the definition of the family has been the focus of public debates. At the end of the twentieth century, rhetoric about the eroding traditional family became broadly accepted as a way of explaining such social ills as poverty, crime, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and gang violence. In the early 1990s, former Vice President Dan Quayle added to the national anxiety by denouncing television character Murphy Brown for having a baby without a husband. Declaring that unwed motherhood was destroying the nation, Quayle blamed the 1992 Los Angeles riots on family
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decline. Although such hysteria has subsided, ideas about family decline and social problems persist (Mintz, 2004).

Welfare reform enacted in 1966 included the goal of promoting the two-parent family. The Personal Responsibility and Welfare Reform Act declared in its preamble that the married, two-parent family is the foundation of a successful society (Scanzoni, 2004:10). According to this logic, the two-parent family is the basis of social order. This family form is extolled as the one in which children are best socialized to become good citizens and in which women and men perform the roles essential to society. Any change in family structure is viewed as moral decline—that is, a loss of “family values.” The debate about declining family values is really about a decline in a particular family structure (Dill et al., 1993).

Much of the current public debate about social problems and family decline centers on legalizing gay marriage (see Chapter 9). Even as public acceptance grows and state after state approves same-sex marriage, this debate remains contentious with opponents defending a narrow definition of family. At issue here is not family structure as in the debate about single parents, but family composition. Opponents argue that marriage should be restricted to heterosexual couples. They argue that same-sex marriage violates the definition of marriage, is harmful to children, and is harmful to society. As a result, legalizing gay marriage destroys the family and threatens social order. Like the national debates of the last century, this unfolding dispute highlights “the way in which a society defines family and the implications of that definition for membership in families” (Bolte, 2006:175).

The family-decline refrain is a way of distinguishing the two-parent heterosexual family from today’s family and household options such as (a) more single women having children without a male partner, (b) more people living together without being married, (c) more unmarried couples raising children, (d) more gay and lesbian couples raising children. These practices are denounced as selfish practices that threaten the fabric of society. Put very generally, the family-decline position is that “as a result of hedonistic individualism, we are letting our ‘family values’ slip away and what is needed now is restoring the traditional family structure and composition. (Gerson, 2000; Mason et al., 1998:3).

What is wrong with the claim that family decline is the root cause of many social problems? This reasoning is flawed in two fundamental respects. First, it reverses the relationship between family and society by treating the family as the building block of society rather than a product of social conditions. The notion that changing families threaten society is a form of social reductionism. In this simple model of society, the family is the basic unit, the bedrock of society that “causes political and economic institutions to work or not to work” (Young, 1994:89). In reality, families are situated within the larger political and economic conditions. Family units are not responsible for social order (or disorder) in the larger society. Second, it ignores the structural reasons for family breakdown. Those who persist in seeing the current shifts in family life as the source of disarray have it backward (Stacey, 1994). Divorce and single parenthood are the consequences of social and economic dislocations rather than the cause, as some would have us believe. Poverty, financial insecurity, and high levels of interpersonal conflict are the biggest threat to family well-being (Gerson, 2000). The moral-decline approach is blind to the realities of rising inequality, concentrated poverty, and escalating government policies of social abandonment. It reverses cause and effect, thus making family transformation and growing family diversity convenient scapegoat (see Chapter 14). The simple solution that we return to the nuclear family at all costs allows the public and the government to escape social responsibilities, such as creating millions of jobs that we need, and building new houses and schools,
and creating millions of jobs that we need. This view moves the focus from the larger society to individual family members, who must then devise their own solutions for the social, economic, and technological shifts of our times.

Attempts to reassert the “traditional family” are strong. However, proponents of the two-parent family overstate the evidence that non-traditional families and households produce lasting damage to children and that children are always better off in two-parent families. Not all social scientists agree that family structure and composition are all that matter. Most researchers take a shades-of-gray position on family structure. The evidence does show that children in divorced, remarried, or unmarried families are at greater risk for a number of problems, but there is little support for the frightening picture painted by many (Skolnick, 1997b:16). Social researchers disagree about the benefits of the two-parent structure over other family types for child well-being. Still, important research holds that divorce and other family changes are not disastrous for children, but should be viewed as family challenges that most children adapt to over time (Elliott and Umberson, 2004:46–47). In fact, the vast majority of children in single-parent families turn out reasonably well. Alan Acoc and David Demo, who examined a nationally representative sample of children and adolescents in four family structures, reported few statistically significant differences across family types on measures of socioemotional adjustment and well-being (Acoc and Demo, 1994). They found few statistically significant differences in children’s well-being in first-married, divorced, remarried, and continuously single-parent families (Demo, 2000:18).

Much of the national discussion about the harmful social and cultural effects of family breakdown is a thinly veiled attack on single mothers. Undeniably, many female-headed families are beset with a disproportionate share of family problems. But neither family structure nor family composition lock people in a cycle of poverty. Upholding the two-parent family as superior to all other family forms is a way of scapegoating individuals who are adapting to society’s changes. Shifts in family life cannot be reduced to moral values.

Healthy families need healthy environments. Many neighborhoods have substandard services such as schools, health care, recreation facilities, sanitation, and police and fire protection. Due to massive economic transformations and various kinds of social disinvestment in the public good, the middle class and the poor, families across the country are threatened. This is the real enemy of strong families. Of course, the transformations in family structure and family composition are vital. But we should also ask hard questions about family process, that is the patterns of interaction among family members. We should be concerned not with how well they conform to a particular image of the family but, rather, how well they function—what kind of loving, care, and nurturance do they provide?” (Mason et al., 1998:2; Cowan and Cowan, 2010).
families reflect changes in society. To understand the full range of families that exist today requires that we examine forces beyond individuals and outside the family. It requires a perspective that examines how families are changing in the context of broad political, economic, and technological shifts. A sociological perspective does this. What is a sociological perspective? How does it apply to family study? Sociology focuses on how families are related to other social institutions and structures. Because social structures are abstract and often invisible, we must look behind the facades of family life to see how families are organized in socially patterned ways.

Two sociological principles are used throughout this book. The first principle is that there is a close relationship between families and the larger society that shapes them. The second principle requires a critical examination of family and society that questions the existing myths, stereotypes, and official dogma. Let us look at these in turn.

In studying family life we make a distinction between two levels of analysis. The macro level examines the family in relation to the rest of society. Instead of focusing on family roles and relations in isolation from the rest of social life, families are analyzed in reference to societal trends. The macro level of analysis illustrates how larger social systems shape the smaller family systems. For example, we call on macrostructural change to explain why families are far different from what they used to be. A macro level of analysis also looks at how the family as an institution contributes to the organization of the larger society (Kain, 1990:15). For example, the family is a vital part of the economy because it produces both workers and consumers. The family is a primary mechanism for perpetuating social inequality through the interlocking systems of race, class, and gender. This enables us to see how “society makes families and families make society” (Glaser, cited in Billingsley, 1992:78).

The societal level is not the only focus of our inquiry. We also emphasize the interior life of families. The micro level of analysis examines the internal dynamics of family life. In this type of analysis, the family is a “small group in which individuals spend much of their lives” (Kain, 1990:15). In micro analysis we examine the varied “experiences of kinship, intimacy, and domestic sharing” (Thorne, 1992:12). This is where the vital interpersonal dramas of love and domination, of companionship and conflict, and of happiness and hatred occur. Of course, intimate family relationships reflect the hierarchies of the larger social world. Understanding families requires that we study both the macro level and the micro level and how each affects the other.

Because our emphasis is on social structure, the reader is required to accept the second fundamental assumption of the sociological perspective: the need to adopt a critical stance toward all social arrangements. We must ask these questions: How do current social and economic changes affect families and the individuals within them? How are large-scale social and economic changes experienced by families in different segments of the population? Who benefits under the existing social arrangements and who does not? These questions require that we look beyond the commonly accepted definitions of family and society.

The Paradigm Shift in Family Studies

The world today is in the midst of profound social changes in which people are taking apart and renegotiating “what used to be straightforwardly known as ‘the family’” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2004:499). Just as families in the nation and the world are changing dramatically, so is the scholarship on families. As society experiences major “earthquakes,” social science thinking about families is undergoing “seismic shifts.” Today, new ideas about diversity and social context are sweeping the family field and making it more exciting than ever before (Allen and Demo, 1995; Bengston