CHAPTER 1

Introduction to the Family

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

• Create a personal definition of family and provide reasons for this definition
• Explain what it means to be a discourse and dependent family
• Provide examples of external and internal boundary management strategies for multiple types of discourse and dependent families
• Identify key demographic trends that impact contemporary families
• Describe economic and ethnic trends that affect contemporary families
• Explain how communication serves to construct family relationships
• Explore the implications of ongoing changes in family forms

Angela and her sister Gwen were born to Staci and Mike soon after he returned from combat in Operation Desert Storm. Mike was ten years older than Staci and uncertain about fatherhood. She persuaded him that children would bring joy and meaning to their lives and he reluctantly agreed to her dreams of having children. Soon after the marriage, Angela was born, followed quickly by Gwen. At this time Mike was struggling with uncertainty about his career path and confronting periods of severe depression. Within two years he asked Staci for a divorce, citing her complete devotion to the girls and distance from him, as well as his need for independence. After two years Staci started to date Adam, a colleague at work who had never married. Six months later Staci and the girls moved in with Adam; Mike seldom contacted the girls, who became attached to Adam and his extended family. Staci and Adam worked long hours while Adam’s mother cared for the girls when they were not in school. Staci’s career flourished and she moved quickly up the corporate ladder. After two years Adam proposed, indicating how much he loved Staci and the girls and how he happily anticipated adding more children to their lives. He was devastated to hear that Staci had no interest in having more children and, although they tried to continue their living arrangement, Adam’s pressured pleas for a new family led Staci to announce that she and the girls were leaving. The girls were distraught at losing Adam and, although he tried to maintain contact, Staci discouraged the connection. After six years of career success and struggles as a single parent, Staci married Angelo, a widower with two grown sons, whom she met online. Although he treated the girls well, it was clear he could not wait until they would leave home so he and their mother could begin a life involving just the two of them.

Last week Lacy’s boss announced a company-wide cutback in hours and selected benefits due to poor sales figures in the faltering economy. Lacy felt like she had been punched in the stomach. As a 27-year-old wife, the mother of an autistic son (Sean), and an economic support for her mother, who suffered from multiple sclerosis, any drop in
income would create major family challenges. Her husband Will’s position at a local factory paid less than her income; both incomes were necessary to keep the family afloat. On top of the income loss, the company dropped the tuition benefit that Lacy had used to take classes in respiration therapy at the local community college. She had four more classes to complete before finishing the program and starting on a career track. Eventually Lacy hoped to earn her RN and work in pediatrics. Graduation would represent a major life milestone; she had been struggling to complete the program for five years as she attempted to balance Sean’s needs and therapy, her work, and school, with little support. A teenage pregnancy had derailed her successful high school career, although she received her GED and took college classes whenever possible. Although Lacy could not bear to tell her mother the news, she decided to talk with her godmother, Belle, a preschool teacher who had been married to her Uncle Jack. Although Jack died in a car accident more than a decade ago, Belle remained strongly connected to Lacy, serving as a loving aunt and sounding board for her as she grew up. Whenever things piled up, Lacy knew she could count on Belle to talk her through the problem and to give her pragmatic advice. After two hours of talking and five cups of coffee, Lacy left with some ideas about government-supported tuition programs and the promise of loans to finish her course work.

We are born into a family, mature in a family, form new families, and leave our families upon death. Family life is a universal human experience. Yet, no two individuals share the exact same experience, partly because of the unique communication patterns in each family system. Because the family is such a powerful influence in our lives, we need to examine family relationships to understand ourselves better as members of one of the most complex and important societal groups. Family communication patterns serve to construct as well as reflect familial experience. We create our families just as we are created by these families.

As you read this text, you will encounter some content about which you have some expertise, because you have spent your life in some type or types of family arrangements. Yet, because you have lived in only one or a small number of family structures, your experience is limited compared to the range of potential family experiences. Your reading and reflections should expand your understanding of many families’ communication patterns and life experiences, such as the families you meet in the opening of each chapter.

You will encounter a framework for examining communication within families that addresses primary family functions (managing cohesion and change) and secondary functions (family images, themes, boundaries, and biosocial issues). You will encounter this framework as well as systems theory throughout the book. Eventually, you should be able to apply the framework to an unknown family and analyze it as a communication system. We also hope that you will apply what you learn about communication dynamics to your own family or others’ family experiences.

Throughout this book, you will find cases at the beginning of chapters and narratives written in first person within the text itself. You will also find short first-person family examples, provided by friends and students, which illustrate many of the concepts discussed in the text. (The names of the characters have been altered to provide anonymity.) These cases should enable you to understand and apply the concepts more completely. Some of the narrative comments will remind you
As family members, teachers, and family researchers, we hold certain basic beliefs that undergird our writings. Our backgrounds have given us particular perspectives that affect how we view families and their communication patterns. Our perspectives may be very similar to or quite different from yours. Because our backgrounds influence our thinking and writing, we wish to share these beliefs with you in order to establish a context for understanding.

1. There are many ways to be a family. Family life is as diverse as the persons who create families.
2. The “perfect” family does not exist. Each family must struggle to create its own identity as it experiences good times and stressful times over many years. All families are influenced by the larger context in which they exist.
3. Communication serves to construct as well as reflect family relationships. It is through talk that persons define their identities and negotiate their relationships with other family members and with the rest of the world. In addition, talk serves to indicate the state of family relationships to family members and, sometimes, to others.
4. Communication serves as the process by which family members create and share their meanings with each other. Members develop a relational culture, or a shared worldview, that contributes to creating a relatively unique communication system.
5. Families socialize members to their underlying values and beliefs about significant life issues, such as gender, health, love, and religion, to name a few.
6. Families involve multigenerational communication patterns. Members are influenced by the patterns of previous generations even as they create their own patterns, which, in turn, influence future generations. The family serves as each person’s first communication classroom, teaching members about managing relational closeness and distance in relationships, as well as change.
7. Families reflect cultural communication patterns. Racial and ethnic backgrounds influence lifestyle and behavior, as well as communication norms that affect future generations unless they are consciously altered.
8. In well-functioning families members work at understanding and managing their communication patterns; they recognize that developing and maintaining relationships takes effort. Members develop the capacity to adapt, create connections, and manage conflict. Finally, members are self-aware; most strive to achieve the goal of effective communication.

This text avoids presenting prescriptive solutions for family problems; rather, it introduces you to the diverse world of families and their complex communication patterns. We believe the ideas and examples presented will help you develop your observational and analytical skills. We hope your increased understanding of family communication will give you an increased appreciation for complexities and variations inherent in today’s diverse family forms. We also hope you will find the study of family communication as fascinating and challenging as we do.

As an introduction to the family, in this chapter we will discuss definitional issues and family status. The next section establishes an understanding of the concept of the family that will be used throughout the rest of the book. We invite you to read these pages with your heart as well as your head.

Families: Definitional Issues

What does the word family mean to you? Reaching agreement on the meaning of the word family presents a greater challenge than you might suspect. In this subsection, you will encounter the variations implied in the simple term family. Today, no widely agreed upon definition of the term family exists. Over the past three decades families have been described according to biological ties and legal ties, as networks of persons who live together over periods of time supporting each other, and as groups of people who have ties of marriage and/or kinship to one another.

Even today, after many academic disagreements, the question of how best to define family remains inherently problematic. Many family scholars believe that the American family does not exist. Family historian Tamara Harevan (1982) expressed her concern with the idealized family, claiming that U.S. society always has contained “great diversities in family types and family behavior that were associated with the recurring entrance of new immigrant groups into American society. Ethnic, racial, cultural class differences have also resulted in diversity in family behavior” (p. 461). Another family historian, Stephanie Coontz (1999), believes that most Americans move in and out of a variety of family experiences across their lifetimes. Factors such as finances and individual educational levels significantly affect the different paths of family formation and dissolution (Cherlin, 2010). In other words, “Families change their size and shape throughout their histories…but throughout these changes we recognize them still as families, and as whole ones at that” (Stewart, Copeland, Chester, Malley, & Barenbaum, 1997, pp. 245–246).

Today, a family may be viewed more broadly as a group of people with a past history, a present reality, and a future expectation of interconnected mutually influencing relationships. Members often, but not necessarily, are bound together by heredity, legal marital ties, adoption, or committed voluntary ties. Wamboldt and Reiss (1989) developed a process definition of the family as “a group of intimates who generate a sense of home and group identity; complete with strong ties of
loyalty and emotion, and experience history and future” (p. 728). In her essay on redefining families, the legal scholar Martha Minow (1998) argued that it is not important whether a group fits a formal legal definition; instead, what is important is “whether the group of people function as a family: do they share affection and resources, think of one another as family members, and present themselves as such to neighbors and others?” (p. 8). Clearly, these definitions emphasize the personal, voluntarily connected relationships among family members instead of relying solely on blood ties or legal agreements as the basis for a family.

Recently, Floyd, Mikkelson, and Judd (2006) offered three frames or lenses for crafting family definitions—a role lens, a sociolegal lens, and a biogenetic lens. Looking through the role lens, “relationships are familial to the extent that relational partners feel and act like family” (p. 27); this establishes social behavior and emotion as the defining characteristics. The sociolegal lens relies on the enactment of laws and regulations, defining family relationships as those formally sanctioned by law. The biogenetic lens depends on two criteria: the extent to which the relationship is directly reproductive, at least potentially, and whether or not the relational partners share genetic material (p. 33). The latter point reflects findings that humans have an evolved motivation to be conscious of their levels of genetic relatedness with others. These approaches represent the complexity of defining a family that challenges everyone, from researchers to each individual family’s members.

In addition to the family systems framework that undergirds our view of families in this book, you will see a second perspective appearing in the pages to come. This perspective is important as it highlights the central role of communication in all aspects of family life. One of your authors, Kathleen Galvin (2006), argued that contemporary families depend, in part or in whole, on communication to define themselves, calling this “discourse-dependency.” That is, families depend on communication to develop, identify as a family, and carry out being a family over the life course. We will talk more about the central role of communication in families in Chapter 2.

The family is becoming less “traditional,” given the growth of the number of single-parent families, stepfamilies, adoptive families, and families headed by lesbian or gay partners. This is important, as we will see in some of the statistics to follow that discourse-dependent families are becoming the norm. Today, many diverse family forms, previously referred to as “non-traditional,” appear increasingly normative. Yet, some members face unsettling challenges to their family’s authenticity. Therefore, many family members depend, in part or in whole, on communication to “define themselves for themselves” as they interact with outsiders, and even each other, about their family identity.

The more discourse dependent a family is, the more members rely on communication strategies to manage their family boundaries. They need to do this with those outside the family and, at certain time, with those inside the family. External boundary management involves using communication strategies to reveal or conceal information about the family to outsiders. These strategies include labeling, explaining, legitimizing, and defending. In contrast, internal boundary management refers to the use of communication strategies to create maintain members’ internal sense of we-ness or being a family. These strategies include naming, discussing, narrating, and ritualizing (Figure 1.1).
Chapter 1  ▶ Introduction to the Family

External Boundary Management
When families appear different to outsiders, questions and challenges arise. Members reveal or conceal relevant family information.

Labeling
Titles and positions provide an orientation to a situation; labeling frequently involves identifying the familial tie when introducing or referring to another person.
- I want you to meet . . . my (options) stepfather, Bill, my mother’s husband, my pops
- Maggie is . . . (options) my mother’s friend, my mother’s partner, my stepmother

Explaining
Explaining involves making a labeled family relationship understandable, giving reasons for it, or elaborating on how it works. Usually this is a response to non-hostile inquiry.
- My sister used a sperm donor and her eggs. I was the gestational carrier.
- We adopted him from Vietnam when he was eight months old.

Legitimizing
Legitimizing invokes the sanction of law or custom: it positions relationships as genuine and conforming to recognized standards.
- My mother and Don have been together for 14 years. He functions as my father.
- I adopted my husband’s son after his former wife died. He calls me “Moms.”

Defending
Defending involves shielding oneself or a familial relationship from attack, justifying it or maintaining its validity against opposition. This is a response to hostility or a direct challenge.
- My mother gets enraged when people ask if I’m her “real daughter.”
- When someone tells me my mothers will go to hell, I tell them off.

Internal Boundary Management

Naming
Naming plays a significant role in the development of internal family identity as members struggle to indicate their familial status and connections.
- We call my birth mother Aunt Carrie or Carrie.
- My step-grandmother goes by “Nona Pat.”

Discussing
Discussing reflects the degree of difference among family members that affects the amount of ambiguity in their family situation. This occurs when members see few role models for their family form.
- We talk about Karin’s anonymous sperm donor and his musical talents.
- Jack asked how he thought he should address his birth mother whom he located.

Narrating
Narrating involves the emergence of family stories; they represent the family’s definition of itself. Members tell and retell, to themselves and to others, the story of who they are and how they got there.
- Let’s get out the scrapbook with your adoption story.
- Tell Uncle Jack about the first time I introduced you to your stepmother.
We believe that families define themselves, for themselves, through their interactions. At the same time, longevity, legal flexibility, personal choice, ethnicity, gender, geographic distance, and reproductive technology impact traditional biological and legal conceptions of family. Society has passed the point of distinguishing between traditional and nontraditional family categories as functional, because what were once thought of as nontraditional families are emerging as normative family forms (Le Poire, 2006). Fitzpatrick (1998) argued that society needs to “employ definitions of the family that depend on how families define themselves rather than definitions based on genetic and sociological criteria” (p. 45). From this perspective “families are constituted by the very communication processes one seeks to study as being ‘within a family’” (Steier, 1989, p. 15). Many scholars are concerned with how family members define themselves as families—in other words, how they use communication to define their family for themselves. For example, think about how

**FIGURE 1.1**

Discourse-dependent families: Constructing and deconstructing family identity


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Two-parent biological families are one of many forms.
two single-parent families must communicate to define themselves as a stepfamily when the parents marry. This **constitutive approach** to creating family challenges the conception of one dominant form of family life.

As we talk about families, we will take a broad, inclusive view. Therefore, if the members consider themselves to be a family, and appear to function as a family, we accept the members’ self-definition. From this perspective, we refer to families as *networks of people who share their lives over long periods of time bound by ties of marriage, blood, law, or commitment, legal or otherwise, who consider themselves as family and who share a significant history and anticipated future of functioning as a family*. Such a definition encompasses countless variations of familial forms and numerous types of interaction patterns.

In contemporary society, family diversity abounds. One indication of the complexities of today’s families may be found in a review of current literature, which includes such categories as large, extended, blood-related groups; formal and informal communal groups; stepfamilies; single-parent families; and gay and lesbian partnerships. These families reflect multiple cultural and socioeconomic situations.

**Your Authors** We want to tell you a bit about the current authors of this book as we represent three very different family experiences and have experienced first-hand family diversity and how families are constituted in communication. Kathleen Galvin grew up in New York City as an only child of Irish immigrants. After her parents died, she acquired an adoptive Norwegian-German family with three siblings. Currently she is married, a parent to three adult children, one of whom was adopted from Korea, and a grandmother of three. Dawn Braithwaite was born in urban Chicago and adopted by a couple in the suburbs. After her adoptive mother died, her family became a stepfamily. She has been married for a long time and she and her husband are a family that is childless by choice. The third, Carma Bylund, is the oldest of seven children and grew up in a university town in Missouri. After a short first marriage, she is currently married and the mother of two energetic school-aged boys and their baby sister. Although our biological and/or adoptive relatives are important to each of us, we also want to note that each of us has friends whom we consider as family members.

What about you? You may have grown up in a small family or a large four-generation household. Your brothers and sisters may be blood related, step, or adopted. Some of you may be married parents, single parents, stepparents, or foster parents. And some of you may have experienced one committed marriage or single

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My family consisted of a mother and brother only, but lacked a father. Due to this fact, my mother brought us together ideologically with a strong focus on being one as a group, but lacking strength when separated. Her comments strongly suggested this when, in time of crisis, she always said, "As long as we pull together and believe in one another, we’ll be okay." Physical proximity also played a role in this togetherness through attending church together on Sundays, and trying to speak to our mother at least once a day. Due to the fact that she worked 13-hour days, she normally arrived home after we had fallen asleep.
lifestyle, whereas others may have experienced divorce and remarriage, or life in a committed partnership. No one-size-fits-all family pattern exists.

**Family Types** This diverse family reality creates a challenge for texts such as this one. We wish to represent the multiple ways families are formed and enacted, yet much of the research still focuses on a small number of family forms. In the following pages we will address these more established family forms more frequently because that reflects the information we have available from research. However, we do need to recognize that families represent multiple overlapping structural forms. Our category system encompasses the following styles of family formation: the two-parent biological family, single-parent family, stepfamily, extended or intergenerational family, GLBT partners and parents, and **committed partners** or small groups. The last category represents a family formed solely through language. These are not discrete categories; many families reflect more than one variation. And it is important to note here that there is no longer a majority family form in the United States.

A **two-parent biological family** consists of parents and the children who result from the union of these parents. Thus, full-blood ties characterize this family; the majority of parents are married but increasingly many are cohabiters.

Traditionally the term “married partners” referred to heterosexual couples who legally marry but do not serve as parents due to choice or infertility. Members of such partnerships continue to serve as children to the previous generation and as siblings and extended family members to other generations, while providing loyalty and affection to one another. Many find themselves deeply involved with extended family members such as nieces and nephews. Today the term also includes many gay and lesbian couples who have legally married in certain states in the United States or other countries.

**Committed partners** include adult pairs (heterosexual or homosexual) who cannot or choose not to marry or parent who consider each other to be family. They may become actively involved with extended family members. Families with these relationships include those who may choose to remain child-free or are infertile, cohabiting heterosexual couples, and gay male and lesbian partners who consider themselves a family.

A **single-parent family** consists of one parent and one or more children. This formation may include an unmarried man or woman and his or her offspring; a man or a woman who lost his or her partner through death, divorce, or desertion, and the children of that union; a single parent and his or her adopted or foster children or a child conceived with technological assistance. For some children, life in a single-parent system is temporary until the parent marries or remarries; however, many children will live in a one-parent family if their parent stays single.

Although the term **single parent** is commonly used, we will alternate that term with **solo parent**, which describes one parent carrying out all parental obligations while ongoing involvement with the other parent is precluded. This occurs most frequently in cases of death, desertion, and single-parent adoption. When two parents take some, usually unequal, responsibility for children, the custodial parent is referred to as the primary parent. When both adults remain involved, they are referred to as co-parents.

The **stepfamily** or **blended family** refers to families formed through merging existing family units. The stepfamily consists of two adults and children, not all of
whom are from the union of the adults’ relationship. Most often two families are blended through remarriage or re-partnering, a situation that brings two smaller units into a new familial relationship. The most common stepfamily formation pattern occurs when a two-parent family becomes a single-parent family for a period of time, after which certain members become part of a stepfamily. Some or all members bring past family history from a relationship that has changed or ended. The couple does not begin as a dyad but, rather, the parent-child relationship predates the partnership bond. Many of these individuals experienced a sense of loss after a first family ended but some stepfamilies are formed by one or both single parents.

The stepfamily has a complex extended family network and children may function as members of two or more households. Many of these family relationships began as “not-so-freely-chosen” or involuntary relationships, as children, stepparents, and siblings most often not choose each other but come together because of the relationship of the parent and stepparent (Braithwaite, Schrodt, & Baxter, 2006; Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001; Pasley & Lee, 2010). Children may have a primary residence in one home or co-reside in both parents’ homes. In many cases, no legal relationship automatically exists between the stepparent and stepchild. An increasing number of stepfamilies are headed by gay or lesbian partners. Today many individuals find themselves part of a second stepfamily before they die due to the remarriage of older adults.

Adoption creates another type of blended family—a family “that is connected to another family, the birth family, and often to different cultures and to different ethnic and national groups as well” (Bartholet, 1993, p. 186). Constructing families through adoption is a centuries-old process, evolving from a responsibility managed within family bloodlines to practices of matching personal characteristics, such as ethnicity or religion, to an open style of connections crossing religious, racial, and international lines. In contrast to earlier practices, in recent decades an increasing number of adoptions are transnational, transracial, and involve older children or children with disabilities, and involve single parents or gay male and lesbian parents. Today almost all domestic adoptions are “open,” reflecting allowing long-term connections between birth mothers and adoptive parents, creating new types of extended families with communication challenges (Galvin & Colaner, 2014). Today, approximately half of domestic adoptions involve children moving from the foster care system.

Foster families serve children who cannot remain living with their biological relatives at a given period of time because the adult parental figure(s) is incapable of safe and appropriate parenting. They provide a substitute family experience until such time as children can return to biological relatives or are adopted by another family or enter a group home at an older age. State-approved individuals and families serve as surrogate parents for indefinite periods of time. Foster families are temporary for some children, while others remain in adoptive families, or group homes, until they “age out” of the system at 18 or 21.

The terms extended or intergenerational family traditionally refer to that group of relatives living within a nearby geographic area. It may be more narrowly understood as the presence of blood or adoptive relatives, other than the parents, in the everyday life of a child. For example, an extended family may be a cross-generational form, including grandparents who live with a parent-child system or who take on
The intentional family involves a pair or a group of people, all or most of whom are unrelated biologically or legally, who share a commitment to each other, may live together, and consider themselves to be a family. These relationships are sometimes called fictive, voluntary, or chosen family. Formal examples of these family types are found in communal situations such as an Israeli kibbutz. Other intentional families are formed through friendship or common interests or commitments. Two neighboring families may share so many experiences that, over time, both sets of children and parents begin to talk of each other as “part of the family,” or a family relationship may grow from common experiences, such as being lesbian or gay. Intentional families may form when the family of origin is estranged, does not share values, or does not meet needs, or when there is a death in the family that leaves a void to be filled. In this case people will create family relationships as substitute or supplemental (Braithwaite et al., 2010). Families formed through intentional ties are highly discourse dependent to define and defend this family type, and members rely heavily on the strategies described earlier in Figure 1.1.

Families formed by same-sex partners continue to rise as increasing numbers of gay and lesbian couples marry or commit to long-term partnerships. Many of these couples also become parents through adoption or procreation. More than 700,000 same-sex households existing in the United States are male-male partners, 13 percent of whom have at least one child living with them. Overall 25.7 percent of all members of same-sex couple households reported that they were spouses (Lofquist, 2011), and this number will undoubtedly rise as marriage becomes legal for lesbian and gay couples in more states.

This last category represents a growing change in thinking regarding family membership. We leave it to you to decide how to consider this idea. Pets, or companion animals, are viewed increasingly as family members. As families become smaller, stresses multiply and more individuals live alone; some scholars argue that “For many people, pets are already functioning as family members” (Cohen, 2002, p. 635). Individuals who see their pets as companion animals experience a psychological bond and mutual relationship (Kurdek, 2009; Walsh, 2009a). Research suggests that children living in single-parent homes bond more strongly with pets than those in two-parent families and that only children bond with household pets more strongly than do those with siblings (Walsh, 2009b). Finally, numerous romantically involved young adults choose to raise pets together before raising children; other pairs raise pets instead of raising children.
Most people experience family life in an evolutionary manner, moving through different family forms over time, experiencing changes due to factors such as aging, death of a family member, or unpredictable stresses. In addition, most persons experience life with one or more biological and adopted siblings, or step-siblings. For most people sibling ties are the longest-lasting family relationships due to age similarity. Sibling relationships are significant sources of information on communication patterns such as family stories, rituals, and memories, specifically in adulthood (Mikkelson, 2006).

It is important to distinguish between two types of family experiences: current families and families of origin. Families beget families through the evolutionary cycles of individuals coming together and separating. Each person experiences family life differently, starting with his or her family of origin. The term, family of origin, refers to the family, or families, in which one grows up. Pioneering family therapist Virginia Satir (1988) depicts the family of origin as the blueprint for people-making, stating, “Blueprints vary from family to family. I believe some blueprints result in nurturing families, some result in troubled ones” (p. 210). Multigenerational patterns, those of more than two generations, are considered as part of the blueprint. As you will discover, family-of-origin and multigenerational experiences influence the development of communication patterns in current families.

**Families: Current Status**

**Demographic Trends**

The composition and shape of the contemporary family is constantly changing. In order to understand family interaction fully, it is necessary to examine the current status of family life in the United States. No matter how old you are, you have lived long enough to witness major changes in your family or in the families around you—changes that bear witness to an evolving national and international picture. American families continue to reflect greater racial and ethnic diversity with each passing decade, and rising numbers of families face increasing economic stress or poverty. Although there are numerous similarities in family communication patterns across large groups, differences in family forms, composition, and culture affect members’ interactions.

A key baseline is the average number of people per household, which was 2.60 in between 2007 and 2011 (United States’ Census Bureau, 2013). Although research figures shift constantly and various sources provide slightly different numerical data, the overall picture emerges. As you read the following demographic trends, think about how they might affect the ways in which family members communicate with each other.

The American family continues to undergo dramatic changes in the twenty-first century, as indicated by the following trends:

* The profile of marriage continues to change. Americans are less likely to marry than in previous decades and most couples live together before marrying for the first time (Wilcox & Marquardt, 2009). Currently couples are marrying later and less as the number of cohabiting couples has risen steadily (Angier, 2013).
Slightly more than half (51 percent) of all U.S. adults are married and this is a record low (Cohn, Passel, Wang, & Livingston, 2011). This does not mean that marriage is unimportant in America. In fact, over 90 percent of Americans will marry at least once. Current trends indicate that first marriages are taking place later in life. Due to rising life expectancies, American marriages are more likely to reach a 40th wedding anniversary than ever before. The odds of remaining in a first marriage until the death of one spouse depend on multiple factors including higher levels of education, parents who remained married, a decent income, marrying after the age of 25, becoming a parent after marriage, and having a religious affiliation (Wilcox & Marquardt, 2009).

The divorce rate is stabilizing. The United States has the highest divorce rate in the world (NCMFR, 2012), although the divorce rate continues to drop. This drop may be explained by the rise of long-term cohabiters, many of whom split up, but this is not included in the national divorce statistics. Divorce rate figures also vary by race and age. First marriages that end in divorce lasted a median of eight years although separation occurred around the seventh year (Kreider & Ellis, 2011).

• The majority of people who divorce eventually form new partnerships either through remarriage or through cohabitation. Almost 30 percent of marriages in 2010 were remarriages for at least one person; the remarriage rate is much higher for men than for women (NCMFR, 2012). Multiple remarriages are becoming more common. Approximately 50 percent of people who divorce remarry within four years. About one in five men and women ages 50 to 69 has remarried twice (Kreider & Ellis, 2011). Childless divorced women under 30 years old are most likely to remarry, followed by divorced women under age 30 with children. Older women are the least likely to remarry.

• The number of single-parent families continues to increase. Americans are witnessing the continuing rise of single-parent or primary parent systems. Recent data reveal that 48 percent of first U.S. births (the mother’s first child) were to unmarried women (Hymowitz, Carroll, Bradford & Kaye, 2013). Single parents maintained 28 percent of U.S. households with children under 18, with 24 percent of these households headed by single mothers (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics Forum, 2013). These single-parent figures vary by ethnicity. For example, only 34.5 percent of black children live in married households (Wilcox, 2009). In 2011 25 percent of white children, 67 percent of black or African American children, 42 percent of Hispanic/Latino children, and 17 percent of Asian children lived in single-parent homes (Kids Count, 2013).

Stepfamilies continue to increase through remarriage and cohabitation. The stepfamily remains a vital family form, although exact figures are difficult to use because of variations in custodial arrangements. Thirteen hundred stepfamilies are forming every day according to Stepfamily Solutions (2010). More than 40 percent of American adults have at least one step-relative in their family (“A Portrait of Stepfamilies,” 2011). Most children in remarried households live with their biological mother and stepfather.

• Fewer families have children under 18. As the large baby boomer population ages and fertility rates decline, the percentage of families with their own child living at home decreased to 46 percent in 2008 (Edwards, 2009). To
some extent this figure represents the increase in the number of women who are voluntary childless (i.e., child-free) or involuntary childless, often due to attempt to become pregnant at a later age (McQuillan et al., 2012).

Birthrates are dropping in western nations. The U.S. birthrate reached a record low as the overall U.S. birthrate decreased 8 percent from 2007 to 2010. The birthrate for foreign-born women plunged 14 percent although these women continue to give birth to large share of babies. Hispanics experienced the largest percentage declines (Livingston & Cohn, 2012).

• **Families continue to be constructed through adoption and foster care.** Two percent of U.S. children are adopted; 9,000 were adopted in 2011 (CCAI, 2011). Adoption includes “related” and “non-related” children. The past decades have witnessed a significant increase in transracial adoption and adoption of older children and those with special needs. International adoption is declining as adoption becomes more normative around the world and adoption regulations have become more stringent. Currently, the vast majority of domestic adoptions are open adoptions. Each year the Internet plays a greater role in the adoption process and adoption reunions.

  Foster care provides temporary alternative families for many children. Approximately 408,000 children (average age of nine) lived within the foster care system in 2010. Almost half lived in a non-relative foster family and a quarter lived with a relative. Approximately 50 percent of children exit foster care each year; many return to their biological families while others are adopted and some remain within the system until they age out. Older foster children confront significant challenges as they try to establish an adult identity and a supportive community (Evan B. Donaldson Institute, 2011).

• **Some families are constructed or expanded through scientific technologies.** The number of babies born through reproduction technologies, across the globe, has reached an estimated 5 million (American Society for Reproductive Medicine, 2013). Although the numbers are small, certain individuals and couples are achieving parenthood through anonymous or known donor insemination due to lifestyle choice or infertility. Infertility affects about 12 percent of reproductive-age women and men (National Health Statistics Report, 2013). Although success rates remain low for infertile individuals, multiple attempts and scientific advances are making this possibility more viable (Smock & Greenland, 2010). Often this process remains shrouded in secrecy.

  Many lesbian or gay individuals or couples turn to new technologies in order to achieve parenthood. Many gay males achieve parenthood through the use of a surrogate who carries a baby to term using her eggs or an implanted embryo. Some single or partnered women achieve parenthood through sperm donated by a known or unknown sperm donor.

• **More adult children are living at home.** Young adult children tend to remain at home until an older age and are more likely to return after departures from the parental home. Many college graduates, often referred to as “boomerang kids,” live with their parents (Vogt, 2009). Among the three-in-ten young adults (ages 25 to 34) who experienced this, a large majority are satisfied with their living arrangements (Parker, 2012). Although reasons vary, common explanations for
this change include growing economic pressures, cultural norms, and returning young divorced mothers with small children.

- **A recent study indicates that 48 percent of women interviewed between 2006 and 2010 cohabited with a partner as a first union, as compared to 43 percent in 2002.** This represents another increase in the growing trend of cohabitation for race and ethnic groups except Asians (Copen, Daniels, & Mosher, 2013). For never-married young adults it is frequently a stage before marriage, but for others it is an end in itself. Traditionally cohabitation was frequently perceived as less of an investment in the relationship due to the lack of a formal ceremony and legal complications. Yet, cohabiters today are more likely to bear children than in previous times. Nearly 20 percent of these women experience a pregnancy in the first year of their premarital cohabitation (Copen et al., 2013).

- **Families formed by lesbians and gay males continue to increase.** Gay male and lesbian committed couples are more visible due, in part, to a greater willingness of same-sex partners to identify their lifestyle as well as to the growth in same-sex parenting, which makes their partnered or marital status more visible. Recent data releases, one by the Census Bureau and one by the American Community Survey, address this issue. The former estimated same-sex married couple households with children at 131,729 and the same-sex unmarried partners at 514,735. The latter estimated same-sex married couples at 152,335 and the same-sex unmarried partners at 440,989. Children included biological step, adopted, non-related, or a combination of types of children.

- **Interracial and interethnic families continue to grow.** Marriages and partnerships among individuals of different races or ethnicities have increased to 10 percent in 2010 (Kreider, 2012). Within three decades the United States will become a plurality nation. The non-Hispanic whites will lose their majority status by 2050 if not before; this population will still remain the largest group but no majority group will exist (Taylor & Cohn, 2012). As a result, the rise of interracial and interethnic families will continue (Powell, Bolzendahl, Geist, & Steelman, 2010).

- **Multigenerational households continue to increase due to changes in ethnicity patterns and recent economic downturns.** In 2012 5.6 percent of family households were multigenerational versus 3.7 percent over a decade ago (Blumenthal, 2012). This was the highest number of multigenerational family households since the 1950s. Due to the economic downturn many young people (25 to 34) are living with their parents, a large majority of whom (75 percent) viewed this arrangement as acceptable or good for the family members involved (Parker, 2012). Many other families are surrounded by relatives in nearby neighborhoods or communities.

As American families become more culturally diverse through immigration, the extended family has reemerged in importance (Bush, Bohon, & Kim, 2010). The African American tradition of extended kinship, as well as the values of recent Asian immigrants, reinforces the central importance of biological or fictive kin (Lee & Mock, 2005).

Grandparents play an increasingly significant role in the family households of many children even when a parent is present. A major study of grandparent child-care responsibilities over a ten-year period found that more than 60 percent
of grandparents provided grandchild care and more than 70 percent of them provided it for more than two years (Luo, LaPierre, Hughes, & Waite, 2012). When children live in households without either of their parents, close to half lived in their grandparent’s household.

- **Families increasingly represent four and five generations.** Individuals continue to live longer. According to the CDC, U.S. life expectancy for someone born in 2005 was 77.9 years for all races. Gender differences do exist, however. U.S. males have a life expectancy of 75.3 years, whereas women have an expectancy of 80.4 years (CDC, 2010).

  This longevity results in four- and five-generation households. Increasing numbers of children are living in grandparent-headed households with or without a parent. In addition, more middle-aged persons are taking on caregiver roles for elderly parents and grandparents. Considering that most people marry for the first time before age 30, a continuous marriage might well be expected to last 45 to 50 plus years. The number of married couples without children at home continues to rise as people live longer and as women bear a smaller number of children in the early years of marriage. On a somber note, widowhood has become an expected life event for the majority of older married women. Since women have a longer life expectancy than men, two-thirds of persons who die at age 85 or older are females.

As you can see, family demographics reveal an increasingly complex set of family structures and characteristics. At the same time it is important to understand that these statistics do not represent all families. Some families are “counted out” or not considered within the census and other statistics. For example, as we discussed earlier, many individuals with no legal or blood ties are creating intentional voluntary kin family systems that provide emotional and economic support over many decades (Braithwaite et al., 2010), and these families are not accounted for in national statistics.

Other families do not “fit” easily on a family tree due to the use of new technologies to achieve parenthood. Not long ago the sister of a woman who could not conceive a child became pregnant with a donor’s sperm and gave birth to a female child who was adopted by her childless sister and her husband. For medical purposes the baby’s aunt is also her biological mother (Holson, 2011). Every year more families add children through the use of technology.

**Economic Issues**

All these demographic changes are intertwined with economic and cultural realities. Working mothers are commonplace and are now the primary wage earners in 40 percent of single-parent and married households (Wang, Parker, & Taylor, 2013). Many couples view a dual income as a necessity or highly desirable. Currently, almost half of parents who live with their children believe they spend too little time, and desire to spend more time, with their children (EHRC, 2009); more fathers report their greater commitment to family than in previous decades (Duckworth & Buzzanell, 2009). In many cases, dual-earner couples with children are working shift schedules for economic or personal reasons. Due to economic realities for American families, members experience great pressures. Some
preteens and teenagers are expected to contribute to the successful running of the household. Young children may spend many waking hours with babysitters or in day-care centers, encountering their parents only a few hours a day. Research on negative spillover between work and family concludes that negative stress from work-family overlap begins in young adulthood and continues through midlife (Grzywacz, Almeida, & McDonald, 2002).

Another economic reality with a direct impact on family life is poverty. Children have replaced seniors as the poorest segment of the population. Children comprise 34 percent of all people in poverty; 45 percent of children live in low-income families; and 22 percent live in poor families (Addy, Engelhardt, & Skinner, 2013). Over the past 15 years young adolescents who did not live with two parents were less likely to move up to a high-income group 12 years later (DeParle, 2012).

Over one-third of the homeless are families with children—a figure that is rising rapidly. More than 1.6 million (1 in 45) children under the age of 18 were homeless in the United States during 2010 (The National Center on Family Homelessness, 2013). Although a large number of poor families contain two parents, about one quarter of single-parent families have incomes below the poverty level (Grall, 2009). Economic pressures add significant stress to the lives of poor family members, and this stress affects the ways family members relate to each other.

Other factors cause economic stress in families. The recent economic downturns have affected family members of all ages and varying economic levels. As noted above, many young adults, with or without partners and children, have returned to live with their parents due to economic pressures. The PEW Research Center reported that three in ten adult children lived with their parents in the last several years (Parker, 2012).
Racial/Ethnic Issues

No examination of family status is complete without a discussion of ethnicity’s impact on family functioning. Within the past decades, several forces have combined to bring issues of ethnicity and race to the attention of family scholars. First, the overall ethnic composition of U.S. families is changing as the number of African American, Hispanic American, Asian American, and Native American families increases. Second, scholars are recognizing the long-term effect of ethnic heritage on family functioning.

American society represents a rapidly changing and diverse set of ethnic and cultural groups, according to recent predictions. Hispanics will soon represent the largest minority group, followed by African Americans and Asians. Small percentages of Native American Indians and Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders round out the population (Taylor & Cohn, 2012). The result will include a significant generational ethnic shift as the Caucasian population both ages and decreases.

Significant differences in race and ethnicity are reflected in family structures. Asians report one of the highest percentages of currently married individuals and the lowest proportion of separated or divorced individuals. Black men and women reported the lowest percentage of currently married, although there were distinct gender differences—42 percent of black men were married, while 31 percent of black women were married. American Indians and Alaska Natives reported the highest divorce rate, whereas, among women, blacks and Hispanics had the highest separation rates (Kreider & Simmons, 2003). Families with children vary greatly by ethnicity. Whereas 35 percent of black children under two years old and 42 percent of black adolescents lived with a solo parent, findings for Asian children indicate 1 percent for toddlers and 9 percent for teenagers. These figures were 6 percent for increasingly, single men and women or gay and lesbian partners are having or adopting children.
white children, 17 percent for white teenagers, 10 percent for Hispanic children, and 22 percent for Hispanic teenagers (Kreider & Elliott, 2009). In 2010, nearly 40 million foreign-born (13 percent of the population) resided in the United States. The largest group (53 percent) was from Latin America followed by immigrants from Asia (Acosta & de la Cruz, 2011). Traditionally, these families report strong grandparent and extended family ties.

As a result of current Hispanic and Asian immigration patterns, many family members have difficulty speaking a second language, English, or do not speak English at home. Twenty-eight percent of immigrants live in households where no one older than age 13 speaks English “very well” or “well” (Hill, 2011). The number of people, ages five and older, who speak a language other than English at home has more than doubled in the past three decades although the majority of these individuals report speaking English “very well” (Shin & Kominski, 2010). The majority of these children are of Hispanic or Asian origin.

Classification systems based on race and ethnicity categories are becoming less useful as people form relationships, marry, and adopt across cultures. In the future, categorization of family race and ethnicity will change as intermarriage, adoption, and cohabitation increase the population of mixed-ethnicity families. Interracial or interethnic opposite-sex married couple households grew by 28 percent over the decade from 7 percent in 2000 to 10 percent in 2010. The number of African American and white interracial married couples has almost doubled in the past two decades. The number of persons who reported multiple races grew by 32 percent between 2000 and 2010 (Jones & Bullock, 2012).

Although generalizations about cultural groups must always be accompanied by an indication of exceptions, a consideration of family ethnicity provides a critical perspective from which to examine communication patterns. This perspective will receive increased attention by the middle of the twenty-first century, Americans of European ancestry will be in the minority. This shift will influence underlying assumptions about what it means to be a family.

Family ethnicity deserves attention because, contrary to popular myth, Americans have not become homogenized in a “melting pot” where cultural identity is discarded; instead, various cultural and ethnic heritages are maintained across generations. There is increasing evidence that ethnic identification and values are retained for many generations after immigration and play a significant role in family life and personal development throughout the life cycle, as second-, third-, and even fourth-generation Americans reflect their original cultural heritage in lifestyle and behavior (McGoldrick, Giordano, & Garcia-Preto, 2005b), as indicated by the following comment:

My parents’ marriage reflected an uneasy blend of Italian and Norwegian cultures. My mother included her Italian relatives on many issues my father considered private. He was overwhelmed by her family’s style of arguing and making up and would retreat to the porch during big celebrations. I came to realize that cultural tension was reflected in many of their differences, including their child-rearing patterns. I carry pieces of those conflicting patterns within me today.
Ethnicity affects family traditions, celebrations, occupations, values, and problem-solving strategies. Strong variations appear across cultures and family issues, such as age at first marriage, single parenthood, older marriages, changing marital partners, and male-female roles. Even the definition of the concept *family* may differ across ethnic groups. For example, whereas the majority “white Anglo-Saxon” definition focuses on the intact nuclear unit, African American families focus on a wide kinship network, and Italians function within a large, intergenerational, tightly knit family that includes godparents and old friends. Most Chinese family members include all ancestors and descendants in the concept of family. Each of these differences impacts communication within the family.

Economic factors also affect multiethnic families. Families are more likely to be poor if they are of African American, Hispanic, or Native American background. Pressures that plague higher percentages of certain ethnic groups, such as unemployment, low wages, and poverty, discourage marriage, and further confound economic well-being and daily life experiences for family members (Simms, Fortuny, & Henderson, 2009).

Changes in family forms, accompanied by economic and cultural variations, affect the ways family members communicate with each other and create needs for families to manage their relationships. For example, the rise of two-career families alters the amount of time parents and children experience direct, face-to-face contact. Economic stress results in escalating family stress. The high divorce rate increases the chances that all family members will undergo major stressful transitions, including changes in their communication patterns. The growth in single-parent families and dual-career couples increases a child’s interpersonal contact with a network of extended family or professional caregivers. Most children in stepfamilies function within two different family systems, each with its own communication patterns. As U.S. families reflect greater ethnic diversity, family life will be characterized by a wider range of communication patterns.

Increased reliance on communication technologies impacts family communication patterns. Working parents use cell phones to check on their children home alone, while nonresidential parents and geographically dispersed transnational family members may keep up with each other’s lives through social media and communication technologies, such as Skype. For example, geographically separated Filipino mothers and children maintain their close ties through technology (Madianou, 2012).

**Functional Families**

It is important to forecast the families we will discuss in the upcoming chapters. Historically, most literature on family interaction has focused on struggling or pathological families (Fincham & Beach, 2010) as researchers are often drawn to trying to understand the problems that are visible and create negative attention. Early studies examined families with one or more severely troubled member—a trend that
was followed by attempts to characterize “normal” families. As you may imagine from the previous description of the definitions and the status of families, there is little agreement on what is “normal.” Currently, many studies focus on the characteristics of well-functioning families.

The following four perspectives on so-called normal families represent the evolution of family studies on family functioning (Walsh, 1993):

1. **Normal families as asymptomatic family functioning**—implies that family members exhibit no major symptoms of psychopathology.
2. **Normal families as average**—addresses families that appear typical or fit common patterns.
3. **Normal families as optimal**—describes ideal or positive characteristics, sometimes reflecting members’ accomplishments.
4. **Normal family processes**—assumes a systems perspective addressing adaptation across the life cycle and management of stresses and diversity contexts.

The first three perspectives quickly prove unworkable because of the static nature of each explanation. The fourth perspective provides a sense of variation and adaptation that captures the dynamic nature of family experiences.

Current scholarship focuses on family strengths in addition to helping families navigate problems (DeFrain & Stinnett, 2007). Recent studies of well-functioning families highlight the tremendous diversity of families that appear to be functional, even as they struggle with predictable and unpredictable changes (Price, Price, & McKenry, 2010). A recent call for a focus on relationship flourishing reinforces this commitment to understanding well-functioning families—those that exhibit relationship strengths—in order to understand how they enact such strengths in the face of life stresses (Fincham & Beach, 2010). Members of these families exhibit intimacy, growth, and resilience; they balance focusing on familial relationships with engaging the larger community.

As it is impossible to talk about what a “normal” family is or should be, in this text, we will focus on communication within functional families, because this constitutes the primary experience for most individuals, most of the time. We hold two basic assumptions about families: (1) there is no one right way to be a family and (2) there is no one right way to communicate within a family. The following pages address a wide variety of family structures and communication behaviors. We take a descriptive approach to families in order to increase your understanding and appreciate the wide range of family life. And we focus on the dynamics of family communication in order to help you appreciate the many different ways to interact within a family.

We hope that you experience some personal benefit, rather than just academic benefit, from reading these pages. Most of you grew up in and live within families that experienced their share of pain and problems as well as joys and successes. May these pages provide you with new insights into those people with whom you share your lives as well as others who live in your communities. As you read, think about your own family and other real, fictional, or media families with which you are familiar. We hope your study of family communication will assist you to make wise choices as you apply what you learn to your own family life and the lives of
families you encounter in your careers or communities. We close this chapter with the words of one previous reader who described how she approached the study of family communication:

Analyzing my own family has not been an easy process. As I began, my entire soul cried out, “How do I begin to unravel the web of rules, roles, and strategies that make up our family system?” I do not claim to have all possible answers; certainly my opinions and attitudes are different from those of the others in my family. I also do not claim to have the answers to all our problems. But I have tried to provide answers to my own confusion and to provide some synthesis to the change and crises that I have experienced. And I have grown from the process.

**Conclusion**

This chapter provides an overview of what it means to be a family and the importance of understanding communication processes in families, and illustrates the enormous diversity of family life. We shared some of our basic beliefs about families and communication, and examined a range of family definitions. We also depicted the current status of the American family through an overview of trends in marriage and partnering, divorce, remarriage, and the formation of families though birth, adoption, and stepfamily relations, as well as ongoing single-parent families. In addition, we addressed issues of economic pressures and cultural diversity. The chapter concluded with a discussion of issues related to “normal” family functioning. Each of these issues will thread through the following chapters.

**In Review**

1. At this point in your life, what is your definition of a family? To what extent has it changed in the past five years?
2. Describe how your own family members, or those in another actual or media family, manage their (internal and external) boundaries as they define or defend their family form.
3. Describe ways in which you have heard (real or fictional) family members address their identity.
4. Select two demographic trends and discuss how they are impacting family ties and communication patterns.
5. Discuss how the recent economic climate impacted a real or media family and how family members communicated about these issues.
6. Identify the family systems of two friends. Compare them in terms of family types as well as socioeconomic status and ethnicity. Explain how these descriptors appear to influence members’ interactions.
7. At this point in your life, how would you describe a well-functioning family?
**Key Words**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blended family</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committed partners</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constitutive approach</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse dependent</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse family forms</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External boundary management</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family of origin</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal boundary management</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legitimizing</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary parent systems</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship flourishing</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>