

The Family and Social Change



What is The Family

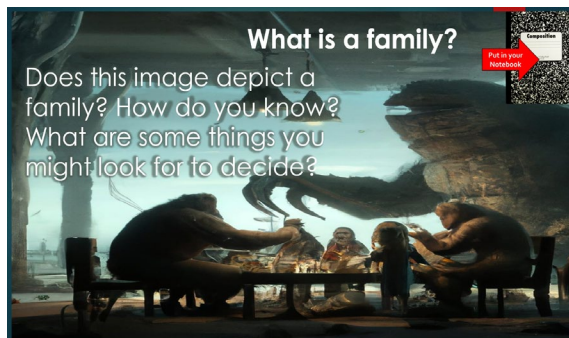
Today I will start Theme 6. This is the culmination of all the stuff we've learned so far. So, we will be taking everything we learned in First Semester about the Foundations of Sociology, and a smattering of our knowledge about research, and we will apply this to understanding the family as a social institution.

This is going to be really valuable. We all have families or some kind of family-like setup. So, this is a thing we are all familiar with. Now we are going to take a closer look. We are going to apply the [sociological imagination](#) to understanding family. Remember, the sociological imagination is the ability to link everyday life to the larger social world, to understand how personal matters are also social issues, and how biography intersects with history. This is our approach to family. It's a great way to really dig into sociology.

You may think that your family is unique. And maybe in some ways, it is. But it's mostly not. Every society in the world, in all of history, has divided up into family units. Many functionalists identify family as the basic unit of society. Understanding family is a great way to apply everything we've learned so far. Also, it's a great way to review a lot of the stuff we talked about first semester. Yes, while we look at family, we will be revisiting our buddies Max, Karl, and Emile. We'll throw in some Blumer, and quite a bit of [Berger and Luckman](#). Yes, we will also be learning some new theories, or at least some new variants of the theories we've already learned.

The first problem we need to address is in asking ourselves, "What is a Family?"

That seems weird because, of course we know what a family is. It's a family! Remember, sociologists do not trust common sense notions. So, the first lesson is an attempt to define the family.



Try it yourself. Brainstorm what you see as the characteristics that make families families. Then share with someone else. What are the things you agree on? What are some differences?

Now think about the sociology that you learned. How might a Conflict Theorist define family, or a Functionalist? How might a Symbolic Interactionist define family differently than a structuralist, or a postmodernist? What might be a feminist understanding of family.

The first thing we need to distinguish is the difference between a family and a household. When we think of family, we often start with units consisting of parental figures and children (we'll debate this in a moment) living together. Then we think of extended family who do not necessarily live together. So living together seems to be somewhat important. But not all individuals who live together constitute a family. People who live together in a single dwelling are a **Household**. For instance, you and your future roommate in college will be a

household...but not necessarily a family. That being said, most of you live with adults responsible for mutual care. That is also a household. So, families often share the same household, but are something more specific.

AICE would like you to be familiar with three scholars on the family and their definitions. The first is the Functionalist Anthropologist George Murdock. He defined families as follows:

‘A social group characterised by common residence, economic cooperation and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults’



Family is Exclusive

Families serve a social function:
Regulate sexual relationships
Socialize Children

Common Residence
Economic co-operation and reproduction
Adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship
One or more children, biological or adopted

George Murdock

This was a pretty open minded approach at the time. He was an anthropologist, so he was thinking in terms of different cultures. That's why his definition allows for more than two spouses. Of course, he wrote this in the late 1940's, so his definition does not allow for same sex spousal arrangements.

As a functionalist, Murdock sees the function of family as twofold. First, it is a way to regulate sexual relationships among adults. For instance, sex within the bounds of marriage is considered legitimate, while pre and extra marital sex is stigmatized. Secondly, the family is responsible for the socialization of children.

Murdock is a good place to start, but certainly you can see some problems with his strict definition. His definition might work for families as they were understood in the pre-war years. But even as Murdock was writing about the family, the definitions were changing. What constituted a family started to become more **Individualized**. In other words, people entered into family arrangements less for satisfying social norms and more for satisfying personal needs.



Anthony Giddens

Family is Inclusive

Family is decided upon **Kinship** arrangement
A negotiated relationship between individuals

- ← Kinship Arrangement
- ← Biology
- ← Affinity
- ← Law (marriage)
- ← Adult members take responsibility for childcare

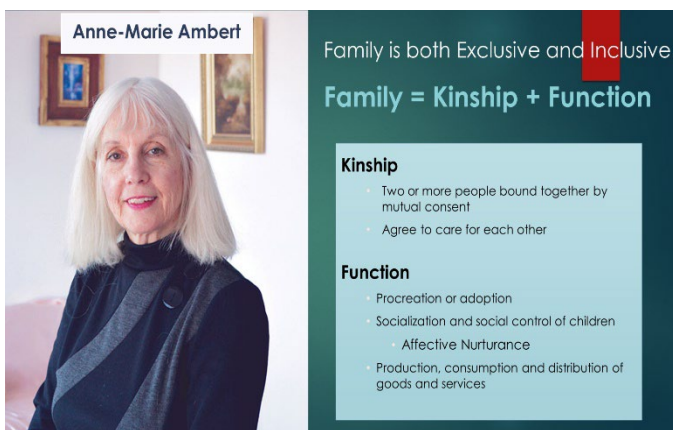
Cambridge (Yeah! THAT Cambridge) sociologist Anthony Giddens, more of a Phenomenologist, had a slightly different definition. Giddens's focus was always on the influences of modernity on social life. He noticed that romantic love had been a traditional foundation of family relations, namely marriage, as a result of the rise of modernity. People in modern societies put a lot of emphasis on love. Love was believed to be this pure emotion that lasted for the rest of one's life. As such, it was a perfect

foundation for marriage. Late modernity, with its liberating principles, especially for women and the postwar feminist movements, led us to question this belief.

In [late modernity](#) (not postmodernity...Giddens is not a postmodernist), we see a decoupling or separation of marriage from social norms and values that were traditionally bound to marriage. Marriage was traditionally a religious ritual, but that no longer holds. Legitimate sex and childrearing was always identified with marriage, but not so much anymore. These ideas have been decoupled from marriage at least to an extent.

For Giddens, family is a negotiated relationship between individuals (notice he does not specify gender here) with regard to mutual care and needs fulfillment and adults care for children. Family is a kinship arrangement. Traditionally, kinship referred to "blood" relations, by which marriage was the approved ritual by which to bind two people who were not blood related. In modern and late modern societies, however, kinships can be defined according to three arrangements. Biology, or genetic relation. Affinity, or mutual feelings of relatedness. For instance, my children refer to my best friend as "uncle" even though he is not biologically my brother, he is a brother through affinity. Finally, law as through marriage or [common-law marriage](#).

Giddens definition is certainly more broad and allows for many different kinds of family arrangements consistent with modern life. But is it too broad? Giddens also ignores structural factors and expectations that encourage us to marry or to not marry, and how we present this marriage to others.



Anne-Marie Ambert tries to bridge the gap between Murdoch's very precise definition of family and Giddens hippy version. It's hard to place Ambert with regard to sociological perspectives. I would put her as a functionalist, but a different kind of functionalist called a "Neofunctionalist". We'll talk about neofunctionalists later. Regardless, Ambert sees family as an intergenerational (more than one generation) of individuals, forming social groups, constituting an institution (think AGIL) defining kinship arrangements. Ambert accepts Giddens observations on kinship.

Ambert sees this kinship arrangement as bound together through mutual consent and a negotiated agreement to care for one another. The function of this arrangement is to provide for the care of children (by birth or adoption), affective nurturance or the socialization and control of children, and economic cooperation.

These are the main three you should know for AICE.

Another interesting fellow you can think about, not included in the notes, is Ulrich Beck. Beck's big contribution to sociology was his concept of the "risk society". Beck posits that modern societies have created more freedoms and choices for individuals than did traditional societies. Consequently, individuals are more aware of the risks associated with their choices. When it comes to marriage and family, greater individualism and increased gender equality have transformed traditional marriage into a riskier arrangement. The marriage may not last. Consequently, the norms of marriage, instead of being established by tradition, are negotiated by individuals based on their understanding of the risks being mitigated by marriage and the risks of entering into the marriage itself.

There you have it. There are more theorists involved. I found this interesting [summary](#) on family related to AICE requirements while doing web searches for this tutorial. It may be helpful. One thing that you may have noticed about all of the definitions of marriage, with the exception of Beck, is that they all assumed that family arrangements are, in essence, childcare arrangements. So, if you don't have children there's no family? Obviously, this is a matter of debate. I think most of you (based on my history of teaching this course) would conclude that children are not prerequisite for forming a family. For instance, some couples choose not to have children. Some are incapable of having children, for instance if two elderly people marry...do they not constitute a family if they do not procreate?

Anyway, I hope this gives you something to think about with regard to definitions of the family.

You also may have noticed that we mention S.E.X. a couple of times. Yes, this theme will address sex with regard to family arrangements. That's kind of a big deal. Hopefully, you are not squeamish about this. We will keep it appropriate.

Types of Families

I know, yesterday it said, "love and marriage". Those are the hazards of posting something early. I was going to do love and marriage, but realized I wanted to tie that in with something else.

Before moving on, I want to let you know that there is a book in the media center called *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* by historian Stephanie Coontz. It's a longish book, but you don't have to read the whole thing. It's also very well written. Much of what we are going to be doing for the rest of the year will draw from the historical changes in family and marriage structures. Coontz can be a lot more detailed than I can. I would recommend getting a copy and reading it. Even if you read a chapter a week, it will be very valuable to you.

Today's lesson is on Types of Family. If you took my advice from yesterday and asked each other how others in your class might define family, you may have noticed some differences. Well, those differences are sociological in nature. They have a historical, social, and cultural context. A hundred years ago, if I asked that question, the number of answers would be limited. Today, not so much.

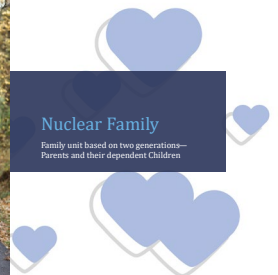
Today is about looking at the different types of family and marriage structures. We can start by you filling in a chart. You know how I love my charts. This one is fun. Read all the way through before starting yours.

Start with two boxes:

Mom and Dad
Me and My Siblings

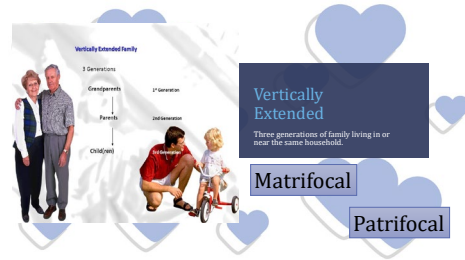
This is your **Nuclear Family**

Mom & Step-Dad Father
Me and My Siblings



Some of you may have to get creative because you have different family arrangements. Next, add your grandparents. Your grandparents would be members of your Vertically Extended Family. That is, they are directly related to you through your nuclear family.

Vertically Extended Family
Grandparents Mom's Side Dad's Side
Mom and Dad
Me and My Siblings



Extended Families
Beyond Mom/Dad/Kids

Now add columns on either side of the column labeled Vertical Extended Family. These columns represent your Horizontal Extended Family on your mother's and father's side.

Horizontal Extended Family	Vertically Extended Family	Horizontal Extended Family
	Grandparents Mom's Side Dad's Side	
Mother's Siblings/My Aunts and Uncles	Mom and Dad	Father's Siblings/My Aunts and Uncles
My First Cousins	Me and My Siblings	My First Cousins

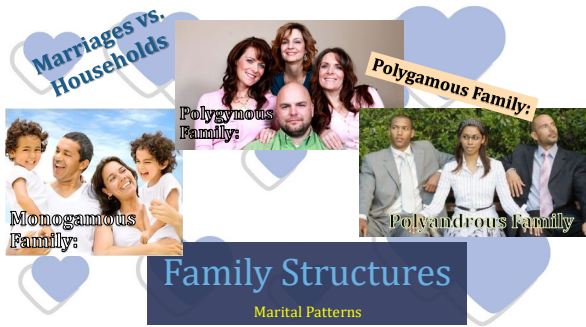
The boxes at the top right and left can remain empty, but if you wanted to use them, they would be reserved for your grandparents siblings...but then it starts getting complicated because each parent has two parents, four grandparents, eight great grandparents, etc. Each row represents one generation.

Horizontally Extended Families
Includes branches within a single generation: Aunts and Uncles.

facebook
Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life.

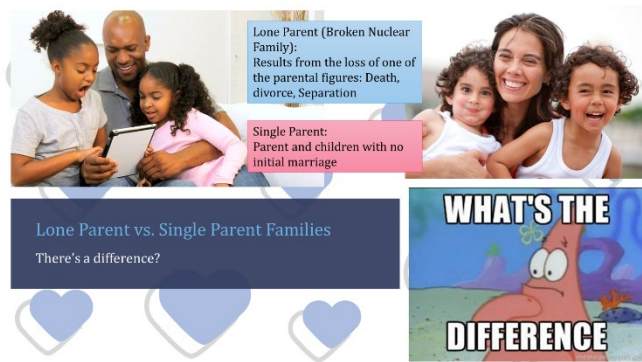
Modified Extended Families
Extended families that maintain contact but do not live with or near each other.

There are a couple things to pay attention to. If your family has two parents, that's a **Monogamous Family**. In other words, the adults only have one spouse. Of course, as you know, sometimes spouses divorce and then marry others. Is that really "monogamous"? Maybe...but. Sociologists refer to this as **Serial Monogamy**, having only one recognized spouse at a time, but not the same one for the rest of your life.



If there are more than two spouses, that's **Polygamy**, or a Polygamous Family Structure. Polygamous families can have multiple spouses at one time of varying genders, but they usually, by virtue of culture, break down into two groupings. **Polygynous Marriages** involve a single male with multiple female spouses, or **Polyandrous Marriages** in which a single female has multiple male spouses.

The other thing you need to know is that families with only one parent can be broken down into two categories. **Lone Parent Families** are the result of a "broken nuclear family." It once had two parents, but as a result of divorce, separation, or death, there is now only one parental figure. A **Single Parent Family** is one in which the biological parents were never married and the household includes only one dominant parental figure. But recent research shows that Single Parent Families are often not really "single parent". In many such arrangements, the other parent plays a significant role in the child's life even though they are not part of the same household. Anyway, AICE used to focus on this distinction, but really hasn't in the last few years. But you should know that it is a distinction.



Also, you should realize at this point that families change and shift over time. A Nuclear family may break down resulting in divorce, creating two Lone Parent Families that more or less interact. Then one parent gets married again, and we have a Lone Parent Family and a **Reconstituted Family** from the point of view of the children...and this goes on and on. My point is...*Quod Complicatus Est!* It's complicated.



Debate on the Universality of the Nuclear Family



Nuclear Family

Family unit based on two generations—
Parents and their dependent Children

Today we will learn about the first major debate in the sociology of the family. Remember, all of the essays in your papers will reference a particular debate in the field. So, the essays on your Paper 2 Exam may reference the debate on the **Universality of the Nuclear Family**.

George Murdock, was a cultural anthropologist, not a sociologist. That means he was interested in studying what he referred to as cultural universals. What are the things that all cultures have in common no matter where they are. For instance, all cultures play games. Game playing is a cultural universal.

One claim that Murdock made was that the nuclear family, that part of the family consisting of two generations, the parental figures and the dependent children, is a universal feature of human cultures. Of course, the basic argument is a birds and bees kinda story. To have rugrats, there's a process that involves a two reproductive age people of the opposite sex. Bam! Mom, Dad, Chilluns. Nuclear family. Simple.

Murdock claimed that even cultures that don't seem like they have nuclear families still break down according to nuclear family expectations.

The Universality of the Nuclear Family

The Nuclear Family is a Universal feature in all societies

Dominance Thesis: The nuclear family is the dominant family structure in all societies. Any variation is still premised on the nuclear family.

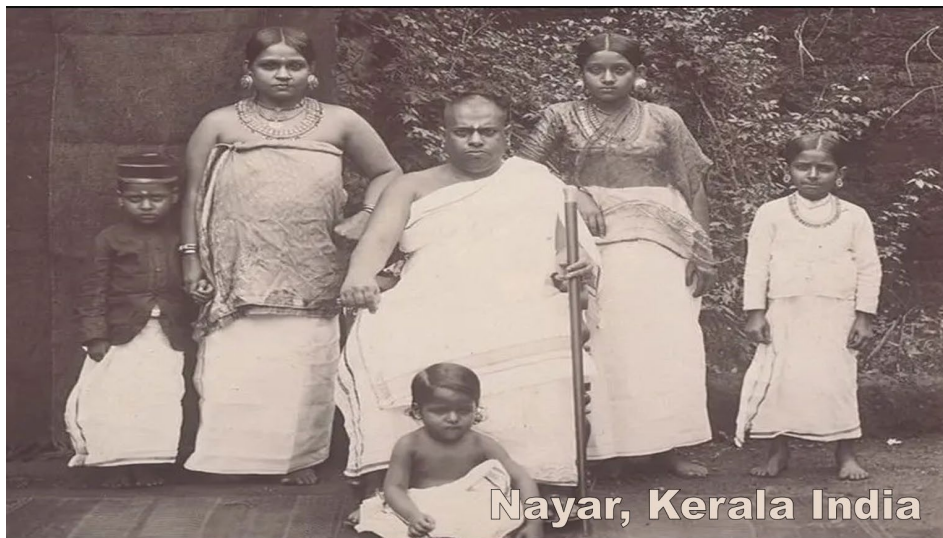
Convergence Thesis: Even societies with non-nuclear structures are moving toward a nuclear family arrangement.

George Murdock was interested in what he called Cultural Universals. Studied 250 "representative" human societies to find what was common to all.

Okay. So, is Murdock right?

It should come as no surprise that critics of Murdock point to some examples of family structures that don't, at first sight, seem to be nuclear in nature. They claim that Murdock and his students are evaluating diverse cultures through a western (meaning U.S. and European) middle-class bias. They point out that the standard, [Father Knows Best](#) version of the family that everyone loved in the mid-twentieth century is not a universal feature around the world and isn't even a universal feature in the west outside of the middle class. Today, we could argue that even within the middle class there's significant diversity.

AICE offers a brief look at the following family structures that I've included in the images below. It's a good idea to research those structures and identify how they diverge from the nuclear family and how they conform to the nuclear family. For instance, all the pictures I could find sure look nuclear to me...does that represent the structures of the family, or the biases of the photographer?



Ashanti, West Africa



Kibbutz, Israel

One of the differences you may see is that some family structures around the world are **Matrilineal**. In other words, families are defined according to the female lineage. Most families in the U.S. and Europe are **Patrilineal**. For instance, if you have your father's surname (family name), that is a characteristic of patrilineal descent. If your family were Matrilineal, you would have your mother's surname. Of course, more and more families in the United States have become matrilineal. Many working-class black families are centered around the grandmother, for instance. Many children of single parent families have their mother's surnames. What about families that are now hyphenating the surnames to create a new

surname? Um...that could prove complicated in a couple of generations! Anyway, the point is that there's plenty of debate on this topic.

Do research at the very least on the family structures listed above. You can even research more examples of diverse family structures.

Then apply what you've found to the argument that the Nuclear Family is a universal feature of all societies.

PSST! Don't tell anyone, but ChatGPT makes this really easy! You could have a list in seconds from which to start your research. Just sayin'.

Evidence in Favor	Evidence Against

Below are a couple of essay prompts with regard to the Universality of the Nuclear Family

Evaluate the view that increasing family diversity means the nuclear family is no longer dominant.

Evaluate the view that the nuclear family is no longer the dominant family form.