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Families are families, right? Well, yes and no. Families meet important needs for their members and for society. Family members make commitments to one another and share an identity. Yet Chapter 1 showed us that families are not all alike in form. We also saw in Chapter 1 that social factors influence our personal options and choices. Put another way, individuals and families vary as a result of the social settings in which they exist.

In this chapter, we will explore the social context in which today’s families live out their opportunities and choices. We’ll examine variations in family life associated with race/ethnicity, immigration, religion, and the events of our nation’s recent history. We’ll look at how the economy affects families and at the impact of the changing age structure of American society.

This chapter focuses on U.S. society, but we need to point out that economic and technological changes affect families in other societies in both the developed and developing worlds. We begin here with a look at how historical events in the United States have affected family life.

**Historical Events**

Historical events and conditions affect options, choices, and the everyday lives of families. In the early twentieth century, for example, the shift from an agricultural to an industrial economy brought people from farm to city. There was a “great migration” of rural southern African Americans to the urban north.

American family life has been a different experience during the Great Depression, World War II, the optimistic fifties, the tumultuous sixties, the economically constricted seventies and eighties, the time-crunched nineties, and the current era of a globalized economy. In the depression years, couples delayed marriage and parenthood and had fewer children than they wanted (Elder 1974). During World War II, married couples were separated for long periods. Married women were encouraged to get defense jobs and to place their children in day care. Some husbands and fathers were casualties of war. Families in certain nationality groups—Japanese and some Italians—were sent to internment camps and had their property seized even though many were U.S. citizens or long-term residents (Taylor 2002; Tonelli 2004).

The end of the war was followed by a spurt in the divorce rate, when hastily contracted wartime marriages proved to be mistakes or extended separation led couples to grow apart. World War II was also followed by an upick in marriages and childbirth. In the 1950s, family life was not overshadowed by national crisis. The aftermath of the war saw an expanding economy and a postwar prosperity based on the production of consumer goods. The GI bill enabled returning soldiers to get a college education, and the less well-educated could get good jobs in automobile and other factories. In those prosperous times, people could afford to get married and have larger families. Men earned a “family wage” (enough to support a family), and children were cared for by stay-at-home mothers. Divorce rates slowed their long-term increase. The expanding economy and government subsidies for housing and education provided a sound basis for family life (Coontz 1992).

The large baby boom cohort born to these parents (1946–1964) has had a powerful impact on American society, giving us the cultural and sexual revolutions of the “sixties” as they moved from adolescence to young adulthood in the Vietnam War era. They are likely to reshape middle age and aging, as they move into their senior years (Davies and Love 2002; Pew Research Center 2005).

The baby boomers had a relatively secure childhood in both psychological and economic terms. The generation that followed has encountered a more challenging economic and family environment (Bengston, Biblarz, and Roberts 2002). Today, a man is far less likely to earn a family wage. Partly for that reason, more wives seek employment, including mothers of infants and preschool children. Moreover, the feminist movement opened opportunities for women and changed ideas about women’s and men’s roles in the family and workplace. Educational careers were extended and marriage delayed for both sexes, as young people prepared for a competitive economic environment. (Gender will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4; work and family, in Chapter 12; and the economy, later in this chapter.)

In the 1960s and 1970s, marriage rates declined and divorce rates increased dramatically—perhaps in response to a declining job market for working-class men, the increased economic independence of women, and the cultural revolution of the sixties, which encouraged more individualistic perspectives. These trends, as well as the sexual revolution, contributed to a dramatic rise in nonmarital births.

The present historical moment is one of adaptation to these rather profound cultural changes and to economic ups and downs much affected by globalization of the economy. Also of significance today is the “war on terror.” The September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States created a pervasive sense of insecurity, triggered
new overseas wars, and led to a debate about what changes in our way of life might be necessary.

Of course, the family has faced the necessity of adapting to demographic, social, economic, and political change throughout its history. Families have also coped with internal and external wars. "Facts About Families: Military Families" focuses attention on those families whose lives are structured by war and military service today.

Age Structure

Historical change involves not only specific events but also the basic facts of human life. One of the most dramatic developments of the twentieth century was the increased longevity of our population. Life expectancy in 1900 was forty-seven years, but an American child born in 2004 is expected to live to seventy-eight (Minniño, Heron, and Smith 2006, Table 1).

Aging itself has changed; the years that have been added to our lives are more healthy and active ones (Bergman 2006c). Survival to older ages has meant that men and women over sixty-five are now more likely to be living with spouses than in the past. For those without spouses, maintaining an independent residence has become more feasible economically and in terms of health. The advent of the "war on terror" has brought the elderly a new respect, as their experiences living through World War II seem currently relevant (Witchel 2001).

Among the positive consequences of increased longevity are more years invested in education, longer marriages for those who do not divorce, a longer period during which parents and children interact as adults, and a long retirement during which family activities and other interests may be pursued or second careers launched. More of us will have longer relationships with grandparents, and some will know their great-grandparents (Rosenbloom 2006).

At the same time, the increasing numbers of elderly people must be cared for by a smaller group of middle-aged and young adults. Moreover, divorce and remarriage may change family relationships in ways that affect the willingness of adult children to care for their parents (Bergman 2006c). The impact of a growing proportion of elderly will also be felt economically. As the ratio of retired elderly to working-age people grows, so will the problem of funding Social Security and Medicare.

At the other end of the age structure, the declining proportion of children is likely to affect social policy support for families raising children. Fewer children may mean less attention and fewer resources devoted to their needs in a society under pressure to provide care for the elderly: "Adults are less likely to be living with children, . . . neighborhoods are less likely to contain children, and . . . children are less likely to be a consideration in daily life. . . . [T]he needs and concerns of children . . . gradually may be receding from our consciousness" (Whitehead and Poppenoe 2001, p. 15). Only 20 percent of those eligible to vote have children (Conlin 2003b).

In the foregoing discussion of history and of the age structure of our population, there is an underlying theme: the economy. Economic opportunities, resources, and obligations are an important aspect of the American society in which families are embedded. We turn now to a more detailed discussion of the economic foundation of the contemporary family.

The Economy and Social Class

We tend to think of the United States as a classless society. Yet life chances—the opportunities one has for education and work, whether one can afford to marry, the schools that children attend, and a family’s health care—all depend on family economic resources. Income and class position may affect access to an important feature of contemporary society: technology. Nine in ten family households with incomes of more than $75,000 have a computer, and eight in ten have Internet access. Comparable figures for family households with incomes of less than $25,000 are 40 percent and 30 percent, respectively (Day, Janus, and Davis 2005).

Class differences in economic resources affect the timing of leaving home, marrying, and assuming caretaking responsibilities:

An elderly widow with a paid-off house and investments can afford home health care; her children and grandchildren need not organize themselves around her care. In contrast, a family sharing a grandmother’s subsidized housing becomes homeless on her death, and the mother, who has already lost many work days because of the grandmother’s illness, may be fired while apartment hunting. (Kliman and Madsen 1999, p. 93)

Money may not buy happiness, but it does afford a myriad of options: sufficient and nutritious food, comfortable residences, better health care, keeping in touch with family and friends through the Internet, education at good universities, vacations, household help, and family counseling.

Economic Change and Inequality

Americans overall are better off economically than they were in the 1970s. But incomes have grown little for the middle and working classes in recent years. Although the U.S. economy was good for many Americans during the 1990s, others experienced increased job insecurity,

Clicker/Discussion Tip: Ask students to list, on the board, positive and negative consequences of increased longevity and the changing age structure in the US. Facilitate discussion around responses and the impact on family life.

Teaching Tip: Invite an economist to speak to the class about how economic changes are impacting families in recent decades and predictions about the future.
Facts about Families

Military Families

Unless you have a personal connection or history of military service, you probably have not thought about the lives of military families until recently. Now in this time of overseas wars, attention is focused on military personnel and their families.

A Military Family Life

The military can be considered a “total institution” (Goffman 1961). That is, it encompasses all aspects of life—living quarters, associates, schedules, locus of work and social activities, decision-making authority, and, above all, “the sublimation of individual interests to institutional goals [which can extend] to the sacrifice of one’s own life” (Lundquist and Smith 2005, p. 1). Segal and Segal (2004) sum it up as the “risk of injury or death . . . separation from family . . . frequent geographic relocation . . . residence in foreign countries . . . long and unpredictable duty hours and shift work . . . pressures to conform . . . [and] the masculine nature of the organization” (pp. 32–33).

Yet one research team argues that the military is a more “family-friendly” setting (at least in peacetime) than the civilian world. To attract an all-volunteer force, a number of benefits and support systems were put in place that include family housing, extensive health insurance, and day-care and school-age activity centers for older children. Other advantages include job security, a sense of community and community support—and even discount shopping.

“Flat Daddies,” cardboard cutouts of a parent deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan, serve as symbolic placeholders in the families left behind. Flat Daddies and Flat Mommies may go to school and sports events or be brought to the holiday dinner table to serve as a reminder and emotional focus for the duration of a family member’s absence. “Flat Toby” is a real person to his wife and children in the Austin household in Colorado Springs. “It’s nice to see him each day, just to remember that he’s still with us. . . . It’s one of the best things I’ve done during this deployment. I really think it’s helped us stay connected, to remember that he’s still with us” (Zezima 2006, p. 8A; see also MacQuarrie 2006).

Half of U.S. military service members are married, and almost three-quarters have children. Some couples (12 percent) are dual military. The military, which brings together many men and women of marriageable age, seems to provide an “active marriage market” (McCone and O’Donnell 2006). Six percent of military personnel are single parents (Segal and Segal 2004).

Programs of assistance for the poor have been cut, and there is increased economic risk and volatility as well as uncertainty about the future of such benefits as pensions and health insurance (Hacker 2006). In the 2006 election exit polls, only 30 percent of Ameri-
Military Families in Wartime

Some effects of war on the family seem obvious—family separation and the risk of death (Alvarex 2006a). Yet as the Iraq war has become more controversial, morale problems have increased for both troops and their families at home. Although the troops have strong popular support, sacrifice seems limited to military personnel and their families (Haberman 2006).

Separation of a military parent from spouse or partner and children is not a new feature of wartime. But the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have seen repeated and lengthy deployments. One newly married couple, for example, has spent a total of two weeks together in the fourteen months of their marriage. There are more dual military couples serving in Iraq and Afghanistan than in past military conflicts (Morris 2007).

A large percentage of armed forces stationed overseas are composed of National Guard and Reserve troops, who have not usually anticipated such extensive separation from family. Many of these troops are older and have well-established civilian careers or businesses that are severely disrupted by military service (Skipp and Ephron 2006).

On the positive side, technological developments such as e-mail, websites, and webcams facilitate communication between soldiers and their families. Sometimes, though, this can lead to tension, as the overseas partner attempts to maintain active control of the household (Skipp and Ephron 2006). On the other hand, some wives say that war is making their men open up emotionally; “He’s changed dramatically since he’s been over there... He tells me now that I’m his best friend. He’s never said that before” (“I'm Miss You” 2003).

Women make up 15 percent of today’s military (U.S. Census Bureau 2007b; Segal and Segal 2004). Although they are not assigned to combat per se, support service personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan are as much at risk of injury and death as combat infantry. Some counselors have wondered about the difficulty soldier-mothers may have in returning from the battlefield to the “normal” life of parent and child (Alvarez 2006b; St. George 2006).

There are other problems subsequent to military service in wartime that are more intense for the Iraq war. Because of improved medical care and transportation, more soldiers are surviving with very severe wounds, especially multiple amputations and brain injuries. The soldier who went to war may not return as the same person (Rutane 2006; Zoroya 2006). Initial statistics also suggest that post-traumatic stress disorder is more frequent among military returning from Iraq than in some past wars, attributable to the constant risk of danger from unseen bombs and snipers.

Finally, some families must face the tragedy of losing their loved one. In an era in which cohabitation, divorce, and single parenthood are common, ambiguous or tentative family relationships have led to disputes over remains and burials (Murphy and Marshall 2005) and over insurance and other benefits based on a deceased’s military service.

The armed services have made a considerable effort to support families and especially to reach out to the some 600,000 children who have a parent in service. A Sesame Street DVD explains deployment and emotions at a child’s level (Elfrink 2006). There are programs for at-risk youth, as well as vouchers for getaways and marriage enrichment programs for couples (Ansay, Perkins, and Nelson 2004).

Critical Thinking

Do you know one or more families that have been affected by a family member’s serving in Iraq or Afghanistan? How do their experiences illustrate the fact that history and events impact individual and family life?

a. This conclusion is based on a sample of 456 enlisted military personnel from the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. Because these data are older and were collected in peacetime, conclusions must be tentative. This sample was chosen despite these limitations because it is the only data year that has fertility data on military women.
of autoworkers they did forty years ago, and soon more will be working for Japanese than for American companies—at half the wage and benefit level (Reich 2006). White-collar jobs, especially those in technological and engineering fields and some financial services, are moving overseas to countries like India and China (A. Bernstein 2004). But other research concludes that “dire predictions of job losses from shifting high technology work to low-wage nations with strong education systems [are] greatly exaggerated” because more complex, higher-end employment will replace the lost jobs (Lohr 2006, p. C-11).

**Income** Regardless of economic change, the overall long-term trend in household income has been upward, though falling back during periods of recession (see Figure 3.1). However, this picture masks a distribution of income in the United States that is highly unequal. In 2005, the top one-fifth of U.S. households received half the nation’s total income, while the poorest one-fifth received just 3.4 percent. Over the past thirty years, the inequality gap has grown. The rich have gotten richer, and the poor have gotten poorer. “The income gap is now as extreme as it was in the 1920s, wiping out decades of rising equality,” states Princeton economist Paul Krugman (2006a, p. 46).

Even during the recent period of economic growth, the bulk of the gains were realized at higher income levels, while most lost ground or failed to gain. Median income did not rise from 2000 to 2004 after adjusting for inflation. Only in 2005 was there an increase in real incomes for households. Much of this gain had more to do with more jobs (per worker) and more time on the job (and investment income for those possessing such assets) (Greenhouse and Leonhardt 2006; Lyman 2006; Peters and Leonhardt 2006). Median household income is still below what it was in 1998 (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Lee 2006, Table A-1). “[T]he income of the bottom 60 percent of Americans has barely budged since 1979” (B. Stein 2006, p. B-3).

Income varies by race and ethnicity (see Figure 3.2), but all middle to lower groups show moderate gains at best.
Economic inequality is rising in the United States. Not only lower income sectors, but also the middle class have failed to gain ground over the long term. Most of the gain has accrued to those with a college education (Bergman 2006b), but even they have not done well over the last five years, showing gains just a little better than inflation (Leonhardt 2006a, p. 63).

Women have gained more than men since 1970, while men’s wages were largely stagnant (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Lee 2006, Figure 3). Still, access to a male wage remains an advantage. Experts debate the extent to which changes in the family—that is, more female-headed, single-parent households—have contributed to poverty levels (see Chapter 7). Incomes do vary by family type. Married-couple households had the highest incomes in 2005—$66,067 compared to $46,756 for male-headed households and $30,650 for female-headed households (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Lee 2006, Table 1). Some scholars point to the increasing tendency for well-educated, high-earning men to marry their female counterparts, while men and women at the lower end of the economic scale marry each other, creating a “real marriage penalty.” Families diverge even more in income because of this multiplier effect (Paul 2006; Schwartz and Mare 2005).

**Poverty** Poverty rates show somewhat the same pattern as income: long-term improvement but increased disadvantage in the short term. Poverty rates fell dramatically in the 1960s and have risen and fallen since then (see Figure 3.3). The poverty rate has risen since 2000 to 12.6 percent in 2005. The child poverty rate is 17.6 percent, higher than child poverty rates in other wealthy industrialized nations. One in six children in the United States is in poverty (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Lee 2006, p. 13 and Table B-2; United Nations Children’s Fund 2005).

Poverty rates vary by racial/ethnic group. Non-Hispanic whites had the lowest poverty rate in 2005 (8 percent), followed by Asian Americans (11 percent) and Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders (12 percent). Native Americans (25 percent), African Americans (25 percent), and Hispanics (22 percent) have higher rates of poverty. Although the poverty rate of non-Hispanic whites is low, they compose 44 percent of the total number of persons in poverty because they are such a large part of the population (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Lee 2006, pp. 14 and 20 and Table 5).

**Blue-Collar and White-Collar Families and the Wealthy**

Lifestyles vary by social class (which is often measured in terms of education, occupation, and income). In studying social class, social scientists have often compared blue-collar and white-collar workers in terms of their values and lifestyles. Working-class people—blue-collar workers—are employed as mechanics, truckers, machine operators, and factory workers—jobs typically
requiring uniforms or durable work clothes. Some jobs, such as police officer, occupy an intermediate position. White-collar workers include professionals, managers, clerical workers, salespeople, and so forth, who have traditionally worn white shirts to work.

To complicate matters, the nature of some blue-collar jobs has changed dramatically with the advent of computerized manufacturing and the technological transformation of health care support work. At the same time, some professions—medicine, for example—have lost ground in terms of income and autonomy. White-collar job security has been eroded by changes in the economy.

Social scientists do not agree on whether blue- and white-collar workers have become increasingly alike in their values and attitudes in recent decades. Certainly, the widespread availability of certain consumer products at relatively low cost—cell phones, other electronics, stylish clothing, plane travel, and even home ownership—blurs the class distinctions that used to be much more obvious. “You can make a case that the upper half lives as well as the upper 5 percent did 50 years ago” (Scott and Leonhardt 2005; see also Steinhauser 2005). At the same time that we see rising economic inequality, our cultural class distinctions are less clear (Yabroff 2006).

Blue- and white-collar employees, however, may continue to look at life differently, even at similar income levels. Regarding marriage, for example, working-class couples tend to emphasize values associated with parenthood and job stability and may be more traditional in gender-role ideology. White-collar couples are more inclined to value companionship, self-expression, and communication. Middle-class parents value self-direction and initiative in children, whereas parents in working-class families stress obedience and conformity (Hochschild 1989; Lareau 2003b; Luster, Rhoades, and Haas 1989; Tom Smith 1999, pp. 12–19).

Middle-class parenting strategies include involving children in a myriad of stimulating activities and lessons to enhance their development. Although there is no doubt that middle-class parents provide their children with advantages regarding educational success, health care, and housing, sociologist Annette Lareau's study of parenting at different class levels finds certain advantages accruing to children in working-class and poor families. These children see relatives frequently and have much deeper relationships with cousins and older relatives, as well as less time-pressured lives (Lareau 2003a). More highly educated, high-income parents with managerial/professional occupations are less likely than those at lower socioeconomic levels to have dinner with their child every day during a typical week (Dye and Johnson 2007, Tables D7, D8; Roberts 2007b). The achievement pressures and social isolation more characteristic of affluent suburban families result in some surprisingly high rates of depression and substance abuse among upper-middle- and upper-class pre-teens and adolescents (Luthar 2003).

Race and Ethnicity

Social class can be as important as race or ethnicity in shaping people’s family lives. The attitudes, behaviors, and experiences of middle-class blacks, for example, differ from those of poor African Americans (Billingsley 1992). Lareau’s study of child socialization found class to be more significant than race in terms of parental values and interactions with their children (2003b).

Yet, racial/ethnic heritage—the family’s place within our culturally diverse society—affects preferences, options, and decisions, not to mention opportunities. Moreover, the growth of immigration in recent decades will increase the impact of ethnicity on family life because new immigrants retain more of their ethnic culture than do those who have been in the United States longer.

Conceptualizing Race and Ethnicity

To begin this discussion, we need to consider what is meant by race and ethnicity.

Race The term race implies a biologically distinct group, but scientific thinking rejects the idea that there are separate races clearly distinguished by biological markers. Features such as skin color that Americans use to place someone in a racial group are superficial, genetically speaking. Instead, race is a social construction reflecting how Americans think about different social groups. “Race is a real cultural, political, and economic concept, but it’s not biological,” says biology professor Alan Templeton (“Genetically, Race Doesn’t Exist” 2003, p. 4).

In this text, we use the racial/ethnic categories formally adopted by the U.S. government because we draw on statistics collected by the Census Bureau and other agencies. Racial categorization and how individuals are placed in census categories have varied throughout American history (Lee and Edmonston 2005, pp. 8–9). The 2000 census employed five major racial categories: (1) white, (2) black or African American, (3) Asian, (4) American Indian or Alaska Native, and (5) Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (U.S. Office of Management and Budget 1999). In the census, racial identity is based on self-report. In 2000, individuals were permitted to indicate more than one race, but only 2.4 percent did so (Jones and Smith 2001).^2

This last point highlights one problem with census racial categories: Many people have mixed ancestry.
"White" Americans may have some ancestors who were African American or Native American, while most "African Americans" have white as well as black ancestry and some have Native American or Asian ancestry (Bean et al. 2004; J. Davis 1991).

**Ethnicity** You'll notice that "Latino" is not listed as a racial category. That's because Hispanic or Latino is considered an ethnic identity, not a race. Ethnicity has no biological connotations, but refers to cultural distinctions often based in language, religion, foodways, and history.

For census purposes, there are two major categories of ethnicity: Hispanic and non-Hispanic. Hispanic Americans may be of any race (U.S. Census Bureau 2003b). In many statistical analyses, Hispanics are separated out from other whites so that non-Hispanic white and Hispanic become separate categories.

**Minority** In a final distinction, African Americans, Hispanics, American Indians, Asians, and Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders are often grouped into a category termed minority group or minority. This conveys the idea that persons in those groups experience some disadvantage or exclusion, or discrimination in American society as compared to the dominant group: non-Hispanic white Americans.

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2 The Census Bureau does not include Arab as a separate major racial/ethnic category. More than one million Americans identified themselves as of Arab ancestry in the 2000 census (de la Cruz and Brittingham 2003).

3 The Census Bureau does record more finely differentiated cultural identities of both Hispanics and non-Hispanics using terms such as ancestry and national origin. Examples of these categories include German, Russian, Mexican, and Salvadoran.

4 The racial composition of the Latino population is not knowable with certainty. Latino countries of origin typically have more nuanced racial vocabularies than does the United States. Moreover, some Latinos view their ethnic identity as a racial one (AmeriStat Staff 2001; Fears 2003).

In the 2000 census, the racial self-identification of Hispanics' ethnic identity was 48 percent white; 2 percent black; 42 percent "some other race"; 6 percent more than one race; and 2 percent specific other races. Demographers infer from these responses that 90 percent of Hispanics would be classified as "white" (Bean et al. 2004; Kent et al. 2001; Lee and Edmonston 2005, p. 19)

5 Minority in a sociological context does not have its everyday meaning of fewer than 50 percent. Regardless of size, if a group is distinguishable and in some way disadvantaged within a society, it is considered by sociologists a minority group (Ferrante 2000).

The term minority has become a contested one, viewed by some as demeaning; as ignoring differences among groups and rotation in the self-identities of individuals; and as not recognizing the likely future of the United States as a "majority-minority" nation (Gonzalez 2006a; Wilkinson 2000). We will try to avoid using it other than when speaking of numerical differences or in reporting Census Bureau data so labeled.

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The Utility and Use of Racial/Ethnic Category Systems

One can reasonably argue that no category system can truly capture cultural identity. Moreover, the dramatic increase in immigration of Latinos and Asians, groups that are neither black nor white (the traditional racial dividing line), and the growth of intermarriage have made the notion of distinct racial/ethnic categories especially problematic. As racial/ethnic categories become more fluid and as the identity choices of individuals with a mixed heritage vary, racial/ethnic identity may come to be seen as voluntary—"optional" rather than automatic (Bean et al. 2004, p. 23).

A further point is that there is considerable diversity within major racial/ethnic groupings. There are Caribbean and African blacks, for example, as well as those descended from slave populations. Within each major racial/ethnic category, there are often significant differences in family patterns, as Figure 3.4 illustrates.

Within-group diversity makes generalizations about racial/ethnic groups somewhat questionable. "Hispanic" or "Latino" categories are "useful for charting broad demographic changes in the United States . . . [but they] conceal variation in the family characteristics of Latino groups [Cubans and Mexicans, for example] whose differences are often greater than the overall differences between Latinos and non-Latinos" (Baca Zinn and Wells 2007, pp. 422, 424). As another example, though blacks have high poverty rates and low incomes generally, in the New York borough of Queens, black median household income in 2005 was greater than that of whites (Roberts 2006).

Moreover, there are areas of social life in which racial/ethnic differences seem minor if they exist at all.
Little difference in family patterns is apparent between blacks and whites serving in the military, for example (Hickes 2004; Lundquist 2004). In his ethnographic study of fathers who had been high school classmates, anthropologist Nicholas Townsend remarks that:

[i]n my interviews, the racial-ethnic category was not associated with different fundamental values about the place of fatherhood and family in men’s lives. . . . I found a remarkable degree of uniformity in men’s depictions of the central elements of fatherhood. (2002, p. 20)

As these examples make clear, “the complex multicultural reality of American society means that categories used by government agencies such as the Census Bureau are . . . ‘illogical’” (Walker, Spohn, and DeLone 2007, p. 9). So why use them?

First, we use them, qualifiedly, because they do have social meaning in our society. Racial/ethnic stratification still exists in our society. The income of white households is much higher and poverty rates significantly lower than those of African American or Hispanic households. Social policy to ensure equal opportunity requires a base of information about group outcomes.

Second, to learn more about families than mere speculation can tell us, we need to make use of data collected in this format by the government and other researchers. These data can tell us something about the contexts of family life and the impact that social attitudes about “race” and ethnicity have on life chances. “[R]acial statuses, although not representing biological differences, are of sociological interest in their forms, their changes, and their consequences” (American Sociological Association 2002).

Now it’s time to use these racial/ethnic categories to explore the features of family life in various social settings. In doing so, we turn to research rather than rely on assumptions about differences—which may be mistaken. Of course, researchers may themselves be influenced by stereotyped assumptions, but they have become much more conscious of such pitfalls in recent decades, as “Issues for Thought: Studying Families and Ethnicity” indicates.
As men and women from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds came into the field of family studies, they pointed out how limited and biased our theoretical and research perspectives had been. To begin to understand the question of bias, we might think of theory and research on racial/ethnic family groups as falling into one of three frameworks: cultural equivalent, cultural deviant, and cultural variant (W. Allen 1978).

The cultural equivalent perspective emphasizes those features that other racial/ethnic families have in common with mainstream white families. An example would be research finding that middle-class black parents bring up their children much the same as do middle-class white parents (Lareau 2002).

The cultural deviant perspective views the qualities that distinguish minority racial/ethnic families from mainstream white middle-class families as negative or pathological. An example would be analysis that laments the high prevalence of female-headed families among blacks compared to non-Hispanic whites or Asians.

For many years, research on African Americans was focused on poor, single-parent households in the inner city while research on Latinos focused on Mexican immigrants' alleged "patriarchal" culture and other barriers to economic advancement and assimilation (Baca Zinn and Wells 2007; S. Hill 2006; Taylor 2007). This approach still exists, and may even have intensified in current media and policy attention to the African American marriage "crisis" (U.S. Administration for Children and Families n.d.) and the "caste" barrier between single-parent and married-couple families (Hymowitz 2006). But following the negative reaction to the earlier, limited portrayal of racial/ethnic family differences, researchers began to report on the strengths of black families, pointing to strong extended-family support, more egalitarian spousal relation-ships, and class, regional, and rural/urban diversity.

In the cultural deviant and cultural equivalent approaches, white middle-class families are considered the standard against which "other" families are compared, either favorably or unfavorably—a situation conducive to bias. In the third approach, minority families are studied on their own terms. This cultural variant perspective calls for making culturally and contextually relevant interpretations of minority family lives. For example, a substantial proportion of African American single-mother households contain other adults who take part in rearing the children (Taylor 2007). Another study of Hispanic and non-Hispanic white families points to the different ways in which extended families function. Although the Hispanic families provide instrumental help, the white families provide financial help. Both families are close in terms of communication (Sarkisian, Gerena, and Gerstel 2006); the image of white families as lacking an extended-family context is thus challenged.

Cultural variant approaches may lead to "reverse theorizing." Ideas, insights, and concepts developed in the study of families that vary from the majority group are applied to enrich family studies more generally. For example, Annette Lareau (2003a) points to the rich family life of working- and lower-class children, whose parents are less focused on educational and achievement goals and activities so that they have more time to spend with relatives and lead less-stressful lives than seemingly more-privileged middle-class children (Levine 2006).

Research using a comparative approach has shown us that the same family phenomenon may have different outcomes in different racial/ethnic settings. For example, premarital cohabitation is associated with future marital disruption among whites but not among African Americans or Latinos, where it may function as a marital substitute and so represent more stable unions.

The cultural variant approach can have policy implications. Research on extended-family ties illuminates the great amount of instrumental help that Hispanic extended families provide to their members. This means that workplace policies that presume only nuclear family members need the flexibility to provide family care does not take into account the real lives of Hispanic families (Sarkisian, Gerena, and Gerstel 2006).

Today's research on family and ethnicity tends to be more complex and sophisticated than in the past. Concern about family fragility and individual disorganization is balanced by recognition of diversity and of community and family strengths. Multiple influences on racial/ethnic families are acknowledged: (1) mainstream culture; (2) ethnic settings; and (3) the negative impact of disadvantaged neighborhoods or family circumstances that can produce a "minority culture" (S. Hill 2004). Structural influences—economic opportunity, that is—are seen as a powerful influence on family relations and behavior. The role of "agency," or the initiative of families, is recognized: "What happens on a daily basis in family relations and domestic settings also constructs families. ... Families should be seen as settings in which people are agents and actors, coping with, adapting to, and changing social structures to meet their needs" (Baca Zinn 2004, p. 426; see also S. Hill 2004).

Critical Thinking
Does your family heritage or your observation of families make you aware of some family patterns that you would see as different from common American assumptions about families? How could these observations be applied to help researchers learn more about families in a variety of family settings?