



Social Class and Families

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Looking Forward

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What factors determine the social class position of families? 2. How have changes in the American economy since the 1970s affected families? 3. What do the kinship networks of many low-income families do for family members? | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. What are the characteristics of typical working-class and middle-class families? 5. What are the distinguishing features of upper-class kinship patterns? |
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At the end of the twentieth century, the American economy was a study in contrasts. For those in the upper class, times were very good. Consider the new Rolls-Royce Corniche convertible, which offers beauty and status for a mere \$360,000. When Rolls-Royce introduced the car in the United States in 1999, it quickly sold out. Sales of the Jaguar XKR, a relative bargain at \$80,000, were up 80 percent early in 2000. That year the Hinckley Company, a yacht builder in Maine, expanded production to reduce the waiting list for its sailboats, which cost from \$400,000 to over \$1 million (Walsh, 2000).

Even among the less-than-wealthy, Americans with a college education had recently seen an improvement in their economic position. But those Americans without a college education did not share in the end-of-century prosperity. Consider Kenny and Bonita Merten and their two sons, for example. This rather typical working-class family was profiled in the *New Yorker* magazine in 1995.¹ Kenny earned \$7.00 an hour at his first job after marrying Bonita in 1972. His wage peaked at \$11.80 an hour on a factory assembly line in 1993. But he was fired; his supervisors said he worked too slowly and his work was of low quality. Kenny said that factories can be choosy and prefer to hire young men. In 1995, working for a company that puts up barriers, sandbags, and signs on highways, he made \$7.30 an hour.

In the time since Kenny and Bonita married, the cost of consumer goods more than tripled because of inflation. Consequently, Kenny would have to be earning over \$24 an hour to match the buying power he had in 1972. Instead, by 1995 his buying power had declined by 70 percent. "I know I'll never be able to earn \$11.80 again," he said. "The most I can hope for is a seven-dollar-an-hour job that doesn't involve swinging sandbags. Maybe if I come home less tired at the end of the day, I can handle an evening job."

Bonita worked the evening shift at a local nursing home. A recent raise had boosted her pay to \$7.40 per hour. Even with two incomes, the Mertens were often unable to pay all of their bills. "1995 has been a pretty hard year in a pretty hard life," she said. "We had our water shut off in July *and* August, and we ain't never had it turned off even once before."

Kenny and Bonita married at the end of a period of great prosperity in the United States. In the 1950s and 1960s, the American economy was strong and

¹See Sheehan (1995). The entire article is reprinted in Andrew J. Cherlin. *Public and Private Families: A Reader* Second Edition.

wages were rising. In fact, the average income of full-time workers, adjusted for inflation, doubled. Many workers without college educations found jobs in the expanding factories of the nation. But the 1973 decision by oil-producing countries to sharply raise the price of oil sent the U.S. economy into a tailspin, and wages were stagnant until the late 1990s for workers without college degrees. Even after the United States adjusted to the oil price shock, it became clear that our employment base in manufacturing was not growing the way it had in the past. Corporations moved production overseas in order to take advantage of the lower wages paid to workers in the developing world. Computers and other technologies allowed employers to replace some workers with machines, such as the robots on automobile assembly lines. How recent changes in the economy may have affected families—and, more generally, how social class position, income, and poverty affect families—are the topics that will be addressed in this chapter. Let's discuss first, however, what sociologists mean by social class.

Defining Social Class

Class is a concept that is hard to define precisely but difficult to avoid using. It is used in two senses by sociologists. In the first sense, which derives from the writings of Karl Marx, a person's class position in a capitalist society, such as the United States, is determined by his or her relationship to "the means of production" (Marx, 1977). The latter term refers to the things necessary to produce goods and services, such as buildings, machines, and capital (money that can be used to buy equipment, place advertisements, hire workers, and so forth). Marx called those who owned the means of production the capitalist class. Those who traded their labor for wages paid by the capitalists he called the working class. Marx's basic, two-class model, however, is inadequate as a complete description of class in contemporary societies. It does not take into account, for instance, managers who are hired by business owners to supervise the work of others; independent professionals such as doctors in private practice; and owners of small businesses such as mom-and-pop grocery stores. As a result, many sociologists, some of them still working in the Marxian tradition, have developed multiclass models.²

Class in the second sense, for which the term **social class** is used, refers to an ordering of all persons in a society according to their degrees of power, prestige, and privilege. Whereas Marx's model focuses on economic factors, this definition is broader in scope. To be sure, wealthy people often have substantial power, prestige, and privilege, whereas poor people rarely do. Still, these three kinds of rewards are not tied solely to how much money a person has or to whether he or she owns a business. **Power** is the ability to force a person to do something even against his or her will. Most powerful people, however, are able to exercise their power most of the time without resorting to force or coercion. The president of the United States—who from 1992 to 2000 was Bill Clinton, a man without great wealth who did not even own a home—has perhaps more power than any other person in the world. He is the Commander in Chief of the world's most powerful military, and he has great political power as Chief Executive. **Prestige** refers to honor and status in a society. Supreme Court justices have prestige far greater

social class an ordering of all persons in a society according to their degrees of power, prestige, and privilege

power the ability to force a person to do something even against his or her will

prestige honor and status in a society

²See, for example, Wright (1976).

Middle-class families have a secure, comfortable income and can afford privileges such as a seashore vacation.



privilege a special advantage or benefit enjoyed by some individuals

ideal type a hypothetical model that consists of the most significant characteristics, in extreme form, of a social phenomenon

than their incomes alone would predict. A cardinal of the Catholic Church has great prestige and substantial power (by, for example, threatening excommunication) but little income. **Privilege** is a special advantage or benefit enjoyed by some individuals. It is more closely tied to income and wealth, for people with enough money can usually buy a privileged style of life, from beautiful homes to fine vacations to private schooling for their children.

In practice, a person's power, prestige, and privilege are heavily determined by her or his income, occupation, and education. Instead of a few distinct classes, this ordering might produce numerous layers, or "strata," in a society; consequently, some sociologists argue that, strictly speaking, one should not use the term "social class" in this second sense but rather speak of "social stratification."³ However, the former term, which is more common, will be used in this book. This chapter will distinguish among families in four broad classes according to power, prestige, and privilege. In real life, there is considerable overlap among these four social classes, and not all families fit neatly into one category. Therefore they are meant as ideal types. Introduced by Max Weber, the term **ideal type** refers to a hypothetical model that consists of the most significant characteristics, in extreme form, of a social phenomenon. It is useful for understanding social life, even though any real example of the phenomenon may not have all the characteristics of the ideal type.

³A good discussion of how to define social class and social stratification can be found in Kohn and Slomczynski (1990).

FOUR SOCIAL CLASSES

The four social classes are upper class, middle class, working class, and lower class. When American adults are asked which of these four classes they belong to without any instruction about what these categories mean—they overwhelmingly choose either middle class or working class. For instance, in the 1998 General Social Survey (GSS), a biennial national survey, 4 percent of respondents said they were upper class, 46 percent said middle class, 45 percent said working class, and 5 percent said lower class (Davis & Smith, 1999). Both extremes apparently sound unpleasant to people, probably because of the stigma of being a “lower-class” person or the embarrassment of admitting to be “upper class.” By most reasonable criteria, the lower class is larger than 5 percent. For instance, 10 percent of American adults had incomes below the poverty level in 1998 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999).

There is little consensus on the size of the upper class or on just how to define it. In general, **upper-class families** are those that have amassed wealth and privilege and that often have substantial prestige as well. They tend to own large, spacious homes, to possess expensive clothes and furnishings, to have substantial investment holdings, and to be recognized as part of the social and cultural elite of their communities. Upper-class husbands tend to be owners or senior managers of large corporations, banks, or law firms. Their wives are less likely to work for pay outside the home than women in other social classes. Some engage in extensive volunteer work, whereas others devote considerable time to entertaining and socializing with other couples to help advance their husbands’ careers. There is little good research on the upper class, and this chapter will focus mainly on the other three social classes.

Middle-class families are those whose connection to the economy provides them with a secure, comfortable income and allows them to live well above a subsistence level. Middle-class families can usually afford privileges such as a nice house, a new car, a college education for the children, fashionable clothes, a vacation at the seashore, and so forth. The jobs that middle-class men and women hold usually require some college education and are performed mainly in offices and businesses. Middle-class men tend to hold higher-paying jobs such as lawyer, pharmacist, engineer, sales representative, or midlevel manager at a corporation. Jobs such as these usually have some prestige and include fringe benefits such as health insurance, paid vacations, paid sick leave, and retirement pensions. Women in general are underrepresented in the higher-paying professional and managerial occupations, although their numbers are growing. Women professionals still tend to be found in occupations that require a college education, such as nursing and teaching, but that don’t pay as much as male-dominated professions. Relatively few women work at blue-collar jobs such as plumber or bricklayer, although again their numbers are growing in jobs such as assembler and bus driver. In contrast, a large number have lower-paying jobs in offices and businesses, such as secretary, department store clerk, and telephone operator. These clerical jobs came to be seen as “women’s jobs” early in the twentieth century, and until recently nearly all the workers in such positions were women (Oppenheimer, 1970).

Working-class families are those whose incomes can provide reliably for the minimum needs of what people see as a decent life: a modest house or an apartment, a car, enough money to enroll children at a state or community college,

upper-class families families that have amassed wealth and privilege and that often have substantial prestige as well

middle-class families families whose connection to the economy provides them with a secure, comfortable income and allows them to live well above a subsistence level

working-class families families whose income can reliably provide only for the minimum needs of what other people see as a decent life

lower-class families families whose connection to the economy is so tenuous that they cannot reliably provide for a decent life

and so forth. Working-class men tend to hold manual jobs in factories, automobile repair shops, construction sites, and so forth. Layoffs are more common in manual occupations than in the office and business jobs middle-class men tend to have, so working-class men are more vulnerable to periods of unemployment. Moreover, working-class men and women are more likely to be contingent workers, who may not work a full week and who may have few fringe benefits. Clerical jobs, such as secretary, or service jobs, such as cafeteria cashier or hospital orderly, are common among working-class women; a minority work in factories.

Lower-class families are those whose connection to the economy is so tenuous that they cannot provide reliably for a decent life, either because they work steadily at low-paying jobs (the so-called “working poor”) or because they are frequently unemployed. They may live in deteriorated housing in neighborhoods with high crime rates. They may not be able to afford adequate clothing for winter, and they may need government-issued food stamps to purchase enough food. Lower-class men, who have little education and few occupational skills, can find jobs that pay only at or slightly above the minimum wage and that have few, if any, fringe benefits and little security. Lower-class women may work at low-paying service jobs; some are dependent on cash assistance from the federal and state governments to low-income families—commonly known as “welfare.” A small minority of lower-class families are homeless. As their numbers grew in the 1980s and early 1990s, “homelessness” became a much discussed social problem. (See *Families and Public Policy: Homeless Families: The Tip of the Iceberg*, on → pages 000–000.)

CHANGING CONCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL CLASS

These categories, although useful, cannot capture the full complexity of the social stratification of families. They date from the social scientific literature of the mid-twentieth century, when most families had two adults present and when relatively few married women worked outside the home. Most women at that time attained their class position through their husbands’ occupations. Consequently, the categories work best in describing the position of two-parent, single-earner families. In contrast, when both spouses work for pay, the line between a middle-class family and a working-class family, or between a working-class and a lower-class family, becomes less clear. Suppose, for example, that the wife and the husband are both high school-educated factory workers, with a joint income that provides a comfortable standard of living. Is this family working class because of the occupations of both spouses and their lack of college education, or is it middle class because of their comfortable joint income? There is no clear answer to this question. Still, when married women are asked what class they belong to, they rely heavily on their husbands’ jobs; but their own education and income also figure into their answers (Baxter 1994; Davis & Robinson, 1988).

Moreover, in the growing percentage of families in which a father is not present, the mothers’ class position is not well defined. In these cases, the mothers’ occupation, education, and sources of income (including child support payments, if any) must obviously be the criteria. A woman who works as a secretary might be comfortably middle class only as long as she is married to a man who earns substantially more than she does. If the marriage ends, her standard of living is likely to drop. Whether she necessarily becomes “working

class” is unclear—she has less income, but she retains the same level of education and many of the same friends and interests. (More will be said about the economic situation of single-parent families below and in subsequent chapters.)

Families and the Economy

To return to the story of families and the changing U.S. economy, every old city has seen the closing of factories that had formerly provided full-time jobs at good wages to workers without college educations. For example, the Singer Sewing Machine Company dominated Elizabeth, New Jersey, from its founding in 1873 until it closed in 1982—its market reduced by ready-to-wear clothes and its competitive edge lost to plants in developing countries that paid workers far lower wages. One longtime worker told anthropologist Katherine Newman:

I worked there forty-seven years and one month. I was one of many people in my family. My niece worked there. My two brothers, my father. You see, Singer's in the old days, it was a company that went from one generation to the other (Newman, 1988).

THE IMPACT OF ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING

Young workers without a college education have been particularly hard hit by the changes in the U.S. economy. The growth of semiskilled and skilled manufacturing jobs has slowed because of two factors. The first is technological change, such as growing use of computers in offices and factories; the new technologies allow firms to replace workers with machines. The second factor is the movement of factory production to developing nations such as Taiwan and Mexico, where wages are much lower. Due to these changes, there is a growing shortage of full-time jobs, with fringe benefits, that pay substantially above the minimum wage and yet are available to persons without a college degree. These were the kinds of jobs that used to allow high school-educated young adults in this country to support a family. The strong economy of the late 1990s improved this situation, but the basic problem remains.

More and more, what's available to young workers without a college education are low-paying service and unskilled manual-labor jobs. In addition, the employment arrangements available to these workers are changing. The older, “standard” job that dominated American industry until recently involved full-time work that continued indefinitely and was performed under the supervision of the employer. But since the 1970s, there has been a sharp increase in **nonstandard employment**: jobs that do not provide full-time, indefinite work directly for the firm that is paying for it (Kalleberg, 2000). Nonstandard employment includes part-time work, work for temporary help agencies, work for subcontractors who perform services (such as maintenance) for larger firms, and short-term contract work. By the late 1990s, more than 20 percent of the workforce was composed of part-time or temporary workers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1999). Most of these jobs offer low or moderate wages, but even middle-class jobs are not immune to the trend. As corporations downsize their managerial workforce to save money, middle-aged white-collar workers can find themselves replaced by temporary or contract workers.

In contrast, the 1950s and 1960s were prosperous times for American families. Between 1945 and 1973, the average income of full-time workers, adjusted

nonstandard employment
jobs that do not provide full-time, indefinite work directly for the firm that is paying for it

*Homeless Families:
The Tip of the Iceberg*

It is one of the paradoxes of public debates about the family that the phenomenon of homeless families, which emerged in the 1980s, has received so much attention compared with the more general problems of poor families. To be sure, homelessness is worthy of public concern. Although few homeless families were visible in 1980, their numbers appear to have increased, over the 1980s and 1990s (Rossi, 1994). By one recent estimate, more than one million children experience a spell of homelessness each year in the United States (Burt & Aron, 2000).

But these families are just a small share of the number with incomes so low that they face the same kinds of risks the homeless face. Several studies have examined why some families become homeless and others don't, and why the number of homeless families has increased.

To become homeless, a family must have both a low income and weak ties to other kin. That is to say, it must have too little money to pay rent and too few relatives to call upon for shelter. Single-parent families are vulnerable on both counts; their incomes tend to be low, and they cannot rely on the resources of a second parent and his or her kin. That is why the vast majority of homeless families are sin-

gle-parent families (Jencks, 1994). Yet most poor single-parent families are not homeless. Peter Rossi (1994) estimated that in the mid-1980s more than two million single-parent families had incomes that were less than half the poverty level. At most, about 5 percent of these families spent a night in a shelter during a given year.¹ The other 95 percent constitute what Rossi calls the "precariously housed," those who are especially vulnerable to homelessness through deep poverty and the lack of a second parent, but who manage to avoid it.

Why have a small but growing percentage of the poor appeared at the door of public shelters for the homeless since 1980? Several factors contribute. Rossi emphasizes the consequences of the restructuring of the economy, especially the worsening job opportunities for young adults without a college education. In an analysis consistent with this chapter, Rossi argues that the decline in manufacturing jobs has undercut the ability of many young adults to earn enough to marry. It may also have reduced the ability of other relatives to provide assistance. Moreover, marriage may have decreased among the poor and nonpoor alike for other reasons having to do with women's greater eco-

nomics independence or with cultural changes such as increased individualism. In any event, the growth of poor single-parent families was a key factor. According to Rossi's estimates, in the 1970s there were 1 million single-parent families with incomes less than half the poverty level but by 1991 there were 2.5 million.

Rossi and Christopher Jencks also note that the average value of welfare payments has dropped substantially since the mid-1970s because Congress and state legislatures did not adjust them for increases in the cost of living. So families with no other sources of income have been less able to afford housing. (Since the time limits on welfare were passed by Congress in 1996 there have been some reports suggesting increased homelessness; see Chapter 6.) Moreover, the supply of low-cost rental housing has declined since the 1980s, either through demolition, remodeling into high rent properties, or neglect and abandonment by slum landlords (Koenig, Burman, & Baumohl, 1996).

The increases in very poor single-parent families in the 1980s and 1990s were real. It must be noted, though, that the increase in serious poverty affected many more "homed" families than homeless families, and yet public attention focused

for inflation, doubled (Levy & Michel, 1991). Young men and women growing up in the 1950s and 1960s expected that they would eventually earn more than their parents, just as their parents were earning more than their grandparents. In 1973, however, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries raised the price of oil fourfold and the economies of the Western nations plunged into recession. Income growth stopped, and wages were stagnant until the late 1990s. Particularly hard hit were the kinds of entry-level jobs for which young parents tend to be qualified. The impact of the economic slump was so great that in 1996, the average 30 year-old husband with a high school degree earned



The number of homeless families seems to have increased during the 1980s and 1990s.

on the latter. Americans seemed far more sympathetic to families living in shelters than to the larger and growing number of poor families sharing cramped quarters with relatives or barely avoiding eviction from their own apartments.

The public reaction suggested that most Americans think every family ought to have a home, whether or not their poverty is in any sense their own making. Homelessness grabbed the guts of many Americans whose hearts were hardened against stories of hardship among the poor. But family homelessness is just the tip of the iceberg of serious poverty among families—an iceberg that grew ominously in the 1980s. Passengers aboard the Titanic learned the hard way that it's dangerous to ignore the rest of an iceberg. We would be wise to heed their lesson.

Ask Yourself

1. Has anyone in your family even been forced to move into a friend or relative's home, or perhaps into a homeless shelter? If so, what caused the crisis?
2. What can the government do to prevent families from becoming homeless? What can families themselves do?

¹I derived this figure by dividing 100,000 by 2 million and converting the result to a percentage.

www.mhhe.com/cherlin

20 percent less than a comparable man in 1979 (Levy, 1998). Consequently, the gap between the wages of more-educated and less-educated male workers has widened considerably since the 1970s. To make matters worse, housing prices have risen substantially.

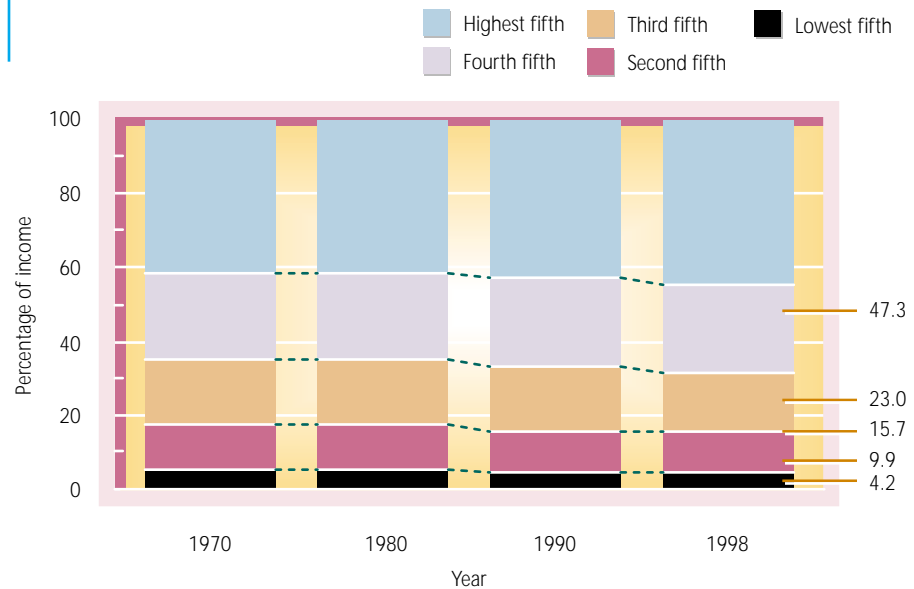
UNEQUAL DISTRIBUTION OF INCOME

Not only have wages failed to grow, but earnings have become more unequal. While the earnings of workers without a college education have been decreasing

FIGURE 4.1

Share of income received by each fifth of families, 1970–1998.

(Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999).



distribution of family income the proportion of the total income of all families in the nation that each family receives

until recently the earnings of college graduates have been stable or increasing (Juhn, Murphy & Pierce, 1993). More generally, the distribution of family income has become more unequal. Suppose that every family in the nation tossed its annual income into one huge pot and then they all lined up, one family in back of the other. If we wanted the **distribution of family income**—the proportion of the total income of all families in the nation that each family receives—to be equal, we would simply give each family in line the same amount of money from the pot. If we wanted the distribution to be unequal, we might give, say, 35 percent of all the money in the pot to the first one-fifth of families in the line, 30 percent to the next one-fifth, 20 percent to the next one-fifth, 10 percent to the next one-fifth, and just 5 percent to the last one-fifth. In fact, the actual distribution of family income in the United States is even more unequal than this hypothetical experiment would create. Moreover, inequality has increased since the early 1970s. Figure 4.1 shows the income shares of each fifth of families from 1970 to 1998. During this period, the share of income that went to the bottom fifth declined from 5.4 to 4.2 percent. Although this does not look like a substantial change, it means that the bottom fifth's income share dropped by about 20 percent. The second- and third-lowest fifths also saw their shares shrink. Even the next-to-highest fifth had a modest decrease. Only the top fifth of all families increased its income share substantially; it rose from 40.9 to 47.3 percent. During this period, then, the wealthy were getting wealthier while the poor were getting poorer and those in the middle were struggling to keep up.

Income inequality among families has increased for three reasons:

- The growing inequality in the earnings of men.
- The growth of single-parent families.
- The movement of middle-class wives into the workforce.

We might call the first reason the Kenny Merten effect: Men with less education and few skills have seen their incomes drop, on average, whereas men with more

education have seen their incomes rise.⁴ Consequently, the gap has widened between families with blue-collar husbands and families with white-collar husbands. The second reason is important because families with only one parent must rely on the earnings of one wage earner. And women's earnings are, on average, lower than men's (→ see *Families and Public Policy: The Earnings Gap*, in Chapter 3; and also Chapter 9). So the growth of single-parent families has widened inequality by creating a larger number of low and moderate-income families.

The third reason is perhaps more subtle. A few decades ago, most of the married women who worked for pay came from poor and working-class families. In contrast, most middle-class married women did not work for pay. As a result, the net effect of wives' employment was to boost the incomes of poor and working-class families more than the incomes of middle-class families; and this effect reduced family income inequality. Over the last few decades, however, many middle-class wives have taken jobs outside the home. Their employment raised the incomes of families in which the husband already was earning a good income. Therefore, the rise in married women's employment since about 1970 has actually increased family income inequality (Burtless & Karoly, 1995).

Trends in Poverty Poverty decreased in the United States during the prosperous 1950s and 1960s, then increased from the 1970s through the mid-1990s. Since the late 1990s, a strong economy has reduced poverty again. How do sociologists know this? Each year the U.S. government calculates an official **poverty line** and publishes statistics on the number of families with incomes below the line. The poverty line is a strange concoction that no one likes but no analyst can do without. It was established in the mid-1960s, when federal officials figured out how much it would cost to buy enough food to meet the Agriculture Department's standard for an "economy" diet—and then, on the assumption that families spend one-third of their income on food, simply multiplied by three (Katz, 1989). To account for inflation, this standard (which is adjusted for the number of people in the family) is multiplied every year by the increase in the cost of living. Advocates for the poor claim it is too low and therefore underestimates the low-income population; many conservatives claim it is too high. Its main virtue is that it can be used to examine changes over time in the percentage of families that fall above or below it. In 1999, the line stood at \$16,895 for a family of two adults and two children under 18 and at \$13,423 for a family of one adult and two children (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999).

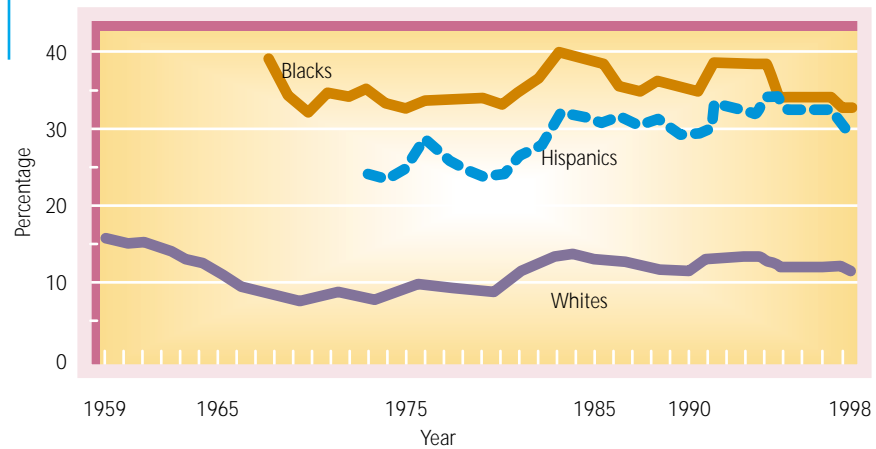
poverty line a federally defined income limit defined as the cost of an "economy" diet for a family of four, multiplied by three

Figure 4.2 shows the percentage of families with children under 18 that fell below the poverty line each year from 1959 to 1998. Information on African-American families is available only from 1967 onward, and for Hispanic families (which may be of any race) from 1972 onward. As can be seen, the percentage of families below the line dropped for white families from 1959 through the early 1970s, and for African-American families from 1967 through the early 1970s. (Other statistics in the same government report suggest that African-American poverty had been declining sharply throughout the 1960s.) When the economy

⁴There is disagreement, however, among economists about the role of men's earnings in the rise of income inequality. Some economists argue that declines in the number of men who work full-time or who work at all are more important than differences in the earnings of employed men (Haveman, 1996).

FIGURE 4.2

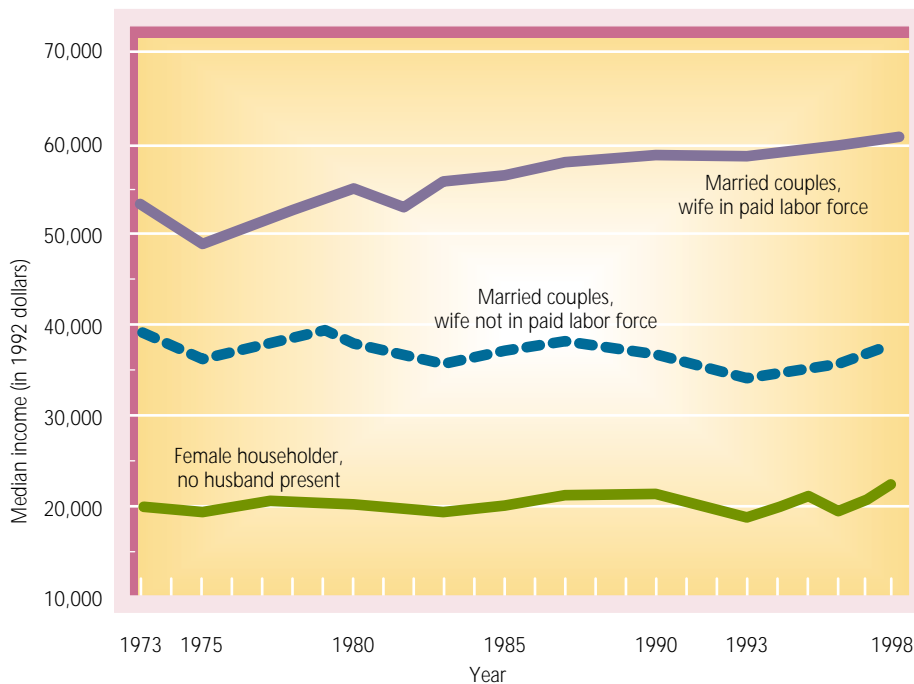
Percent of families with children under 18 that had incomes below the poverty line, for whites, blacks, and Hispanics, 1959–1996. (Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999.)



began to decline in the mid-1970s, however, the percentage of families in poverty began to rise for African Americans and whites and, by the mid-1990s, had attained levels not seen since the 1960s. Since then, poverty rates have declined. Hispanic families showed a sharp rise in poverty between 1972 and 1982 and little change until a recent decline. In 1998, about one in eight white families with children under 18, and about three in ten Hispanic and African-American families with children under 18 were living in poverty, according to the official definition, as were 19 percent of all U.S. children.

Not only did poverty increase until the late 1990s, it also became increasingly concentrated in the growing numbers of households headed by divorced, separated, never-married, or widowed mothers. Whereas about one-fourth of all poor families were headed by single mothers in 1960, more than one-half were headed by single mothers in 1998 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999). These single-parent families tend to remain poor longer than low-income two-parent families, according to a national study, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), which is based on multiple interviews of the same families since the late 1960s. Economist Greg Duncan examined families in the PSID that were poor at any time between 1969 and 1978 and isolated two groups of low-income families: the “temporarily poor,” who fell below the poverty line only 1 or 2 years during the 10-year period, and the “persistently poor,” who fell below the line at least 8 of the 10 years. Most temporarily poor families, he found, had an adult male in the household, but 61 percent of the persistently poor families were headed by a single woman. In addition to family structure, race also affected the likelihood of being persistently poor. Regardless of family structure, most of the temporarily poor were white, but 62 percent of the persistently poor were black. Families in which the head was both black and a single woman made up 31 percent of the persistently poor (Duncan, 1984). (The connections among race, family structure, and poverty are explored in the next chapter.)

Prospects for Dual-Earner Couples During the 1970s and 1980s, many families in the middle of the income distribution kept up with the cost of living only because wives took jobs outside the home. Figure 4.3 shows the trends since 1973 in the median incomes of three kinds of families. (The median is the

**FIGURE 4.3**

Median income of three types of families, 1973–1996. (Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999.)

midpoint in the distribution, the point at which as many families have higher incomes as have lower incomes. All dollar figures are expressed in 1992 dollars, adjusted for increases over time in the cost of living.) The bottom line shows that there was little change in the median incomes of families that were headed by women without husbands present. The middle line shows how married-couple families without wives in the paid labor force fared. The median income for this group also showed little change—a sharp break from the increases of the 1950s and 1960s. The only increase in income came for married-couple families in which the wife worked for pay, as shown by the top line. The gap between the median incomes of single-earner married couples and dual-earner married couples rose from about \$11,000 in 1973 to about \$26,590 in 1998 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999). With housing prices rising and young men’s wages declining, families needed a second income to live the kind of lives they aspired to. An increasing number of them chose to have wives enter the paid labor force.

These income trends led economist Frank Levy, in his study of U.S. income distribution since the 1940s, to write, “The most striking development is in families’ connection to the economy” (Levy, 1987). In the 1940s, Levy notes, most families had two parents and one earner, whether they were rich or poor. There wasn’t much variation in family structure. Yet by the end of the century, more than half of the wealthier families had two earners, while most poor families had no earners or only one earner. In the 1940s, the key economic difference between families was how much the husband earned. Today, the key difference increasingly is whether or not there is a husband in the household at all. As the link between family structure and poverty grows stronger, persistent poverty is becoming the property of single mothers and their children and prosperity is becoming the property of dual-earner, two-parent families.

A couple plays with their child before going to work: dual-earner families have shown the greatest income gains in recent decades.



Class Differences in Family Life

In part because of the different ways they are connected to the economy, the family lives of parents and children vary from social class to social class. Families vary in how many parents are present, in how many steady earners are present, in the ways women and men interact, in the kind of assistance they receive from relatives living in the household and elsewhere, in their attitudes toward child-rearing, and in many other ways. They are not completely different, of course; there are similarities that run across classes—similarities that would be apparent to someone visiting from a non-Western culture where, for instance, parents are heavily involved in helping their children choose spouses, newly married couples move in with the husband's family, and adult children care for their aged parents in their homes. And there is much variation within each social class. Nevertheless, there are some distinctive characteristics that are worth studying.

LOWER-CLASS FAMILIES

A large literature dating back to the Great Depression shows that a husband's place in the family is heavily dependent on whether he has a job.⁵ In the cultures of all industrialized nations, men have been viewed as the main earners; providing a steady income has been seen as their responsibility. Rightly or wrongly,

⁵See, for example, Robert Cooley Angell, *The Family Encounters the Depression* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936); Ruth Shonle Cavan and Katherine Howland Ranck, *The Family and the Depression: A Study of 100 Chicago Families* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938); and Mirra Komarovsky, *The Unemployed Man and His Family* (New York: Octagon Books, 1971). This literature will be discussed in Chapter 10.

women's economic contribution has been viewed as secondary, although this perception may be changing as they increasingly work outside the home. When wives choose not to work for pay, or when they lose their jobs, they are not looked down upon. But when husbands lose their jobs, as happens frequently to husbands in lower-class families, their authority in their homes decreases, their self-respect declines, and other family members treat them with less respect as well. Chapter 10 examines in more detail how a husband's unemployment affects a married couple and their children.

Chronic Poverty and Kin Networks When a man's unemployment problems are chronic—when he is unable or unwilling to find steady employment over many years—he may be viewed, and may view himself, as having failed to fulfill a central role in his life. In a community with many chronically unemployed men, young mothers rely less on marriage and more on other kinship ties for support. Commonly, in poverty areas, young mothers, many of them unmarried, receive help from their own mothers in raising their children. They may also get money or assistance from sisters and brothers, friends, and, sometimes, the fathers of their children. The result is **women-centered kinship**, a kinship structure in which the strongest bonds of support and caregiving occur among a network of women, most of them relatives, who may live in more than one household. Mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and other female kin hold most of the authority over children and provide most of the supervision.

One such community is Potter Addition, David Harvey's pseudonym for a poverty-ridden neighborhood on the rural-urban fringe of a city in the midwestern corn belt (Harvey, 1993). When studied by Harvey in the early 1970s, its residents, all white, had been driven off the land by the growth of large corporate farms that had replaced farm labor with more-efficient farm machinery. Having little education and few marketable skills, the members of this displaced rural population—and its young men, in particular—could find few steady jobs that paid well enough to provide adequately for a family. Instead, the men typically held a series of low-paying, unskilled jobs and experienced bouts of unemployment in between. Harvey writes:

I discovered jumbled job histories in which a man might begin his occupational life as a gas station attendant, graduate to being a roofer, take a job as a janitor, and then five or ten years later return to being a gas station attendant (Harvey, 1993).

Teenage pregnancy was common, and abortions were frowned upon. When a teenage girl became pregnant, parents and other kin pressured the father into marrying. But given the bleak employment prospects of the young man, his wife depended heavily on her mother and other kin for support. Although the man had become a father, his economic failure (or the expectation that he would likely fail) prevented him from playing the conventional role of husband. Without the respect due to a breadwinner, his ability to supervise and discipline his children was limited: rather, his wife often took charge of the discipline as well as the care. The husband's role within the household minimized, he spent most of his time in stereotypical male pursuits outside the household, such as working on cars or drinking with friends.

When the children of Potter Addition reached adolescence and themselves had children as teenagers, the result was a compression of the generations: Women often became mothers as teenagers and grandmothers in their thirties. Children

women-centered kinship
a kinship structure in which the strongest bonds of support and caregiving occur among a network of women, most of them relatives, who may live in more than one household

Women-centered kinship ties are an important source of strength among many low-income families.



were raised primarily by their grandmothers because their teenage mothers were too young to assume the main responsibility for raising them. This alternating-generation pattern of childrearing also occurred in a low-income African-American neighborhood studied by Linda Burton (1990). In both communities, a woman's first experience as the primary caretaker for a new baby often did not occur until she became a grandmother. The two central roles in the women-centered kin networks, Harvey argued, were, first, the grandmother who is also a "mother" to her grandchildren and, second, the young mother who, still in the care of her own mother, is something of a sister to her own children. Marriage, wrote Harvey, was usually a "secondary alliance" compared with the grandmother-mother-child axis.⁶

The extended kinship ties of the women-centered network help its members survive the hardships of poverty. If the members of a household have little to eat or are evicted from their homes, relatives and friends in their network will provide whatever assistance they can. Sisters or aunts who are themselves poor will nevertheless give food or money because they know that in the future they may need emergency help. In this way, the kinship networks of the poor spread the burdens of poverty, cushioning its impact on any one household and allowing its members to get by from day to day. In a widely cited study of *The Flats*, a low-income African-American neighborhood in the Midwest, anthropologist Carol Stack found that individuals could draw upon complex network of relatives and friends that extended over many households (Stack, 1974).

In fact, individuals actively cultivate these networks so that they will have assistance when they need it. For example, Stack writes of Lydia, a woman in *The Flats* who did not need assistance from kin as long as she was married and therefore did not want to be obligated to them. Instead of sharing with kin, Lydia used the money she and her husband were earning to buy a house and furniture. She

⁶Harvey (1993), quoted at 199. Instead of "women-centered," Harvey uses the term "uxoricentric," drawn from anthropological terminology.

generally refused to trade clothes or lend money, and on the few occasions when she and her husband gave something to a relative, they never asked for anything in return. Then, however, Lydia's marriage broke up. During the five-month period when the marriage was ending, Lydia suddenly began to give things to relatives. She gave some of her nice clothes to her sisters and nieces, a couch to her brother, and a television set to her niece (Stack, 1974).

By giving away these things, Lydia was attempting to create a kinship network that she could rely on when she was no longer married. Her actions are typical of how poor people actively construct extended kin networks by exchanging goods and services with others who are in need. Poor people cannot afford to rely solely on *assigned kinship*—the more restricted set of kinship ties that middle-class people acquire automatically at birth and when they marry: father, mother, grandparents, husband, wife, children. Rather, they make use of *created kinship* to recruit assistance wherever it can be found → p. 000.

The Costs of Kin Networks Yet membership in such a kinship network is not without cost—which is why Lydia was reluctant to exchange resources with kin as long as she was married. Because an individual's meager income must be shared with many others, it is difficult for her or him to rise out of poverty. Stack described what happened when an older couple unexpectedly inherited \$1,500. At first, they wished to use the money for a down payment on a house. Then other members of their network, upon learning of the windfall, asked for help. Several relatives needed train fare to attend a funeral in another state; another needed \$25 so her telephone wouldn't be turned off; a sister was about to be evicted because of overdue rent. Moreover, the public assistance office cut their children off welfare temporarily. Within six weeks, the inheritance was gone. The couple acquiesced to these requests because they knew they might need assistance in the future. Even someone who finds a good job may not withdraw from a network unless she is confident that the job will last a long time.

Thus, these kinship-based sharing networks, admirable and necessary as a bulwark against destitution, can nevertheless serve to perpetuate poverty across generations. When another young woman in Stack's study decided to marry, the relatives and friends in her network tried to talk her out of it. Her contributions were valuable, and they did not want to lose her. Recognizing that she and her husband couldn't accumulate enough money to rise above poverty unless she left the network, the young woman married and then left the state that same night (Stack, 1974). In Potter Addition, a woman described how she and her husband moved to a farm outside town, only to see a stream of hard-luck relatives move in and out, eating their food. Of one relative who hoarded his food while eating hers, she said, "To this day, I can't figure out why I didn't throw him out." But then she recalled to the interviewer the many earlier times when she and her husband had received assistance from her guest (Harvey, 1993). Turning aside the demands of kin is a step poor people are reluctant to take unless they are sure they won't need help in the future. The problem is that unless a person denies some requests, it is difficult to accumulate any savings, and without savings it is difficult to leave the network.

WORKING-CLASS FAMILIES

How do sociologists view working-class families, perched above poverty although typically not by much? The predominant picture of working-class families still comes from several widely cited studies conducted in the 1950s, 1960s, and

early 1970s. For example, after living in a working-class Italian-American neighborhood in Boston for eight months in 1957 and 1958, Herbert Gans reported that daily life centered around the family circle, a group of relatives and friends who lived near one another and who socialized largely with one another (Gans, 1982). Most households contained the conjugal family of husband, wife, and children, but conjugal families were embedded in the larger extended family and in many ways were secondary to it. Married couples tended to live near the wife's mother, who provided frequent assistance and emotional support. A study of working-class families in London in 1955 by Michael Young and Peter Willmott also found a strong bond between the wife and her "Mum," who tended to live nearby (Young & Willmott, 1986). When members of the family circle in Gans's neighborhood socialized, the women sat in one room and the men sat in another.

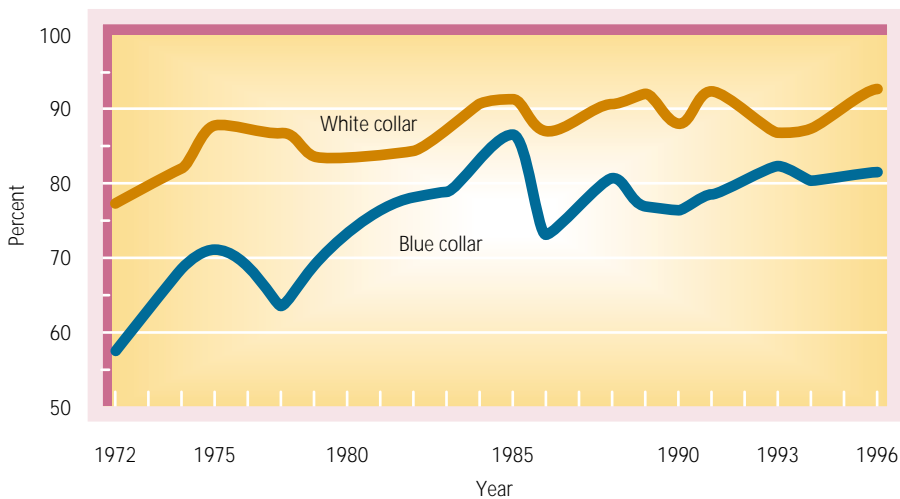
Gender-Role Segregation In fact, women and men's worlds were highly segregated.⁷ In the economic realm, it was seen as men's place to earn money and women's place to care for the children and the home. Even though low incomes often led wives to work at least part time outside the home, the ideal remained the breadwinner-homemaker family. Being the sole earner was a source of pride for men, an ideal to strive for. As one husband is quoted as saying in Lillian Rubin's study of working-class families in 1972:

She doesn't have to work. We can get by. Maybe we'll have to take it easy on spending, but that's okay with me. It's worth it to have her home where she belongs (Rubin, 1992).

But this picture of working-class families is now out of date. Gans, Young and Willmott, and Rubin have reissued their books with new introductions and post-scripts. All of them report that the distinctiveness of the working-class family has faded somewhat. The family circle is not as central to the sons and daughters of the Italian Americans Gans studied, he concluded in 1982, because greater affluence has reduced the need for mutual assistance, because migration to the suburbs has spread relatives apart, and because resistance has grown to the conformity that the family circle demands (Gans, 1982). In other words, the more-prosperous (compared with the 1950s) next generation did not need as often to borrow money, clothes, or food from their parents and siblings. Moreover, it is harder for the sons and daughters to socialize because they don't live as close to one another as family members of their parents' generation did. And the cultural drift toward individual fulfillment clashes with the pressure to maintain the same lifestyle as other members of the circle. According to Young and Willmott, writing in 1986, migration out of the working-class neighborhood of London they studied has loosened the bond between the daughter and her mum.

Gans and Rubin both also observe that the strict division of roles between wife and husband has weakened, although most men still do substantially less of the childcare and housework. Rubin notes that even when the women in her original study were working outside the home, they defined themselves primarily as wives and mothers. Paid work was something they did to help their families, but it was not an important part of their identity. Many shared their husbands' views that, ideally, they ought to stay home. By 1992, wrote Rubin in a new intro-

⁷See also Elizabeth Bott. *Family and Social Network* (London: Tavistock, 1957).

**FIGURE 4.4**

Percent approving of a married woman earning money in business or industry if she has a husband capable of supporting her, for married men under 50, by occupation, 1972–1996. (Source: Davis & Smith, 1996.)

duction to her book, these attitudes had changed: Women viewed employment as a proper activity, necessary to maintain their families' lifestyles and also a source of satisfaction and self-esteem (Rubin, 1992).

Changing Attitudes toward Gender Roles The General Social Survey (GSS) provides further evidence of the changes among working-class families in attitudes about married women working outside the home. In most years since 1972, the GSS has included the question “Do you approve of a married woman earning money in business or industry if she has a husband capable of supporting her?” For each year in which the question was asked, Figure 4.4 shows the percentage who approved among married men under age 50, divided into two groups. The first group (top line) includes men with white-collar occupations: professionals, managers, sales, and clerical workers. These are the kinds of occupations that men in middle-class families are more likely to have. The second group (bottom line) includes those with blue-collar occupations, the kinds that men in working-class families are more likely to have: factory workers, people who operate machinery, and skilled and unskilled laborers. As you can see, in 1972, blue-collar husbands were substantially less likely than middle-class men to approve of a married woman earning money. Yet by the mid-1990s the gap between the two groups had narrowed greatly. Although both occupational groups grew more likely to approve of a married woman working for pay, blue-collar husbands had changed their opinions more. Thus, the figure supports the claim that working-class men have become more accepting of wives' employment probably because of the increasing economic importance of wives' earnings to working-class families.

At all times during the two decades covered by the GSS, most women said they approved of married women earning money in business or industry even if they had a husband capable of supporting them. In 1977, the GSS asked whether respondents agreed with the statement “It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family.” Among married women under 50, a majority of those who had worked last at clerical or blue-collar jobs said that they agreed—they thought it

was better if the man were the achiever. Only among women professionals and managers did a majority disagree. These responses suggest that many married women in 1977 did indeed believe women, ideally, shouldn't work outside the home and that this belief was strongest among those who might be termed working class. By the early 1990s, however, clerical and blue-collar women were much more likely to disagree with the statement than they had been one and a half decades earlier: Only about one-third agreed. This change in attitude fits Rubin's report that women in working-class families have incorporated paid employment into their image of a wife's proper role.

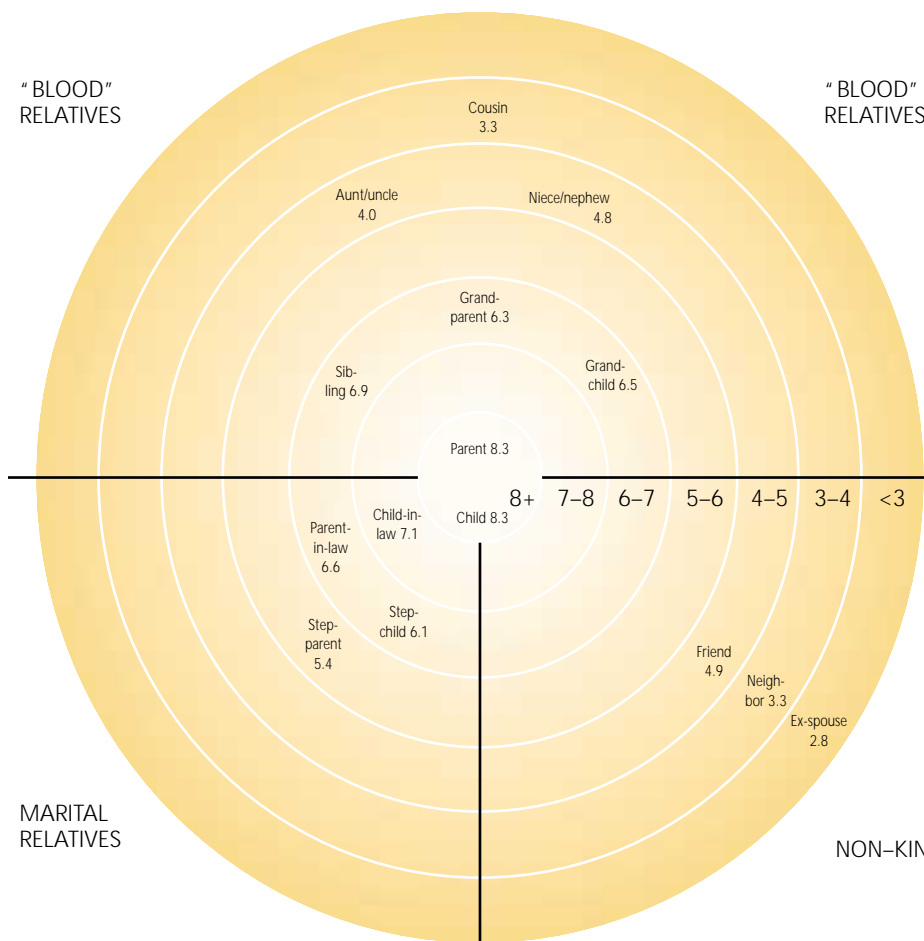
MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILIES

The Primacy of the Conjugal Family The core of middle-class kinship in the United States has been the conjugal family of wife, husband, and children (Schneider & Smith, 1973). Typically, the middle-class conjugal family is more independent of kin than the working-class version. The married couple is expected to spend their income on their children and themselves rather than to provide financial assistance to siblings or other relatives. Any assets or savings are passed from parents to children, rather than being spread throughout a kin network. Income sharing is not as necessary, to be sure, because the standards of living of kin tend to be higher than among the working class or lower class. Yet standards of living are higher in part *because* it is expected that the conjugal family will spend its savings on a down payment for a house rather than doling it out to relatives who need train fare to attend funerals or to pay bills and *because* it is expected that the family will move away from kin, if necessary, to pursue better job opportunities.

A clever survey of adults in the Boston area in 1984 and 1985 demonstrated people's beliefs about the restricted kinship obligations of the conjugal family (Rossi & Rossi, 1990).⁸ Alice and Peter Rossi presented 1,393 people with a set of "vignettes": brief, hypothetical descriptions of relatives and friends who were experiencing crises that might require "some financial help" or "comfort and emotional support." For example: "Your unmarried sister has undergone major surgery and will be bedridden for a few weeks. This problem is straining her financial resources." From a list of relatives and friends (e.g., child, father-in-law, cousin, neighbor), eight crises (e.g., "run out of unemployment benefits and no job in sight"), and two obligations ("to offer some financial help," "to offer comfort and emotional support"), a computer program selected one relative or friend, one crisis, and one obligation at random and printed a vignette. The process was repeated until 26 crisis vignettes had been generated randomly to present to each of the survey respondents. We will focus on the vignettes for which the respondent was asked to rate "How much of an obligation would you feel to offer some financial help?" on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 meant no obligation at all and 10 meant a very strong obligation.

The mean obligation scores for offering financial help, for 15 common relatives and friends, averaged across the various vignettes, was plotted by Rossi and Rossi on a "wheel of obligation," which is reproduced as Figure 4.5. The closer to

⁸Of the respondents, 94 percent were white, only 2 percent were unemployed, and over half were Catholic. The vignettes described here are a subset of a larger set of vignettes that the authors used.

**FIGURE 4.5**

"Wheel of obligation": degree of obligation felt by survey respondents to various relatives and friends, for Boston-area adults, 1984–1985. (Source: Rossi & Rossi, 1990.)

the center of the wheel, the stronger the sense of obligation people felt: A mean score of 10 would be plotted at the hub of the wheel, whereas a mean score lower than 3 would be plotted in the outer circle. Note first that most of the mean scores are close to the hub, indicating that people felt a moderate to high level of obligation to most kin. Only neighbors and ex-spouses had mean scores lower than four. (Of course, these are hypothetical obligations; we don't know whether people actually would provide financial assistance this freely.) Since it did not make sense to ask these kinds of questions about a person's current husband or wife, there is no score for spouses. Other studies suggest that strong bonds of obligation exist between spouses (Schneider, 1980).

Note also that the highest levels of obligation were expressed toward a person's parents and children. Indeed, all the relatives in the two circles surrounding the hub are related to a person through a child, a parent, or a spouse. This pattern suggests that adults felt the most obligation to the members of the conjugal or single-parent families in which they grew up and to the conjugal or single-parent families in which they have had children. These vertical kinship ties—up and down the chain of generations from parents to children to grandchildren—engender the strongest feelings of obligation. They are created by direct descent

and by marriage. Contrast the degree of obligation adults felt toward more distant relatives such as aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and cousins: None has an average score of five or above. Kinship ties from a person's marriage—even a second marriage—are stronger than kinship ties toward these more distant blood relatives. For instance, note that the adults felt more obligation toward a stepchild than toward a cousin or a nephew. Obligations to the conjugal family, and to one's parents, seem to take precedence over those to other relatives.

The image of kinship suggested by these findings is of a tall, solid tree trunk with skinny branches: The vertical axis is strong as one moves from parents to children to grandchildren, but the horizontal links are weaker as one moves from parents to uncles, or from children to nieces. Resources are passed from a person's parents to his or her spouse and children, and then to the grandchildren. Assistance to elderly parents is likely to be much more substantial and more common than assistance to elderly aunts and uncles.

The Role of Women in “Doing” Kinship As will be discussed further in Chapter 11, it is women who do most of the helping of other kin. This is true even in middle-class families, which are more likely than lower- or working-class families to have a husband living at home. On average, women spend more time than men doing the work of kinship (di Leonardo, 1987). They are more likely to send cards and flowers on birthdays and holidays, to plan family get-togethers, and to help a frail elderly parent. Many men rely on their wives to keep these contacts alive and to provide assistance. “On topic after topic,” wrote Rossi and Rossi at the end of their book, “we have found that ties among women were stronger, more frequent, more reciprocal [i.e., both giving and receiving], and less contingent on circumstances [i.e., not just given in a crisis] than those of men” (Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

UPPER-CLASS FAMILIES

Whereas the main economic task for families from other classes is to accumulate wealth, the main task for upper-class families is to preserve and increase their wealth. Traditionally, this has meant that upper-class parents take an active role in determining whom their children will marry. They know that their children will be highly desirable marriage partners, and they wish to obtain a good match: someone from a family that also has wealth or, at least, someone who is likely to help the children manage their wealth wisely. In England in the 1500s, rich families usually chose their child's spouse, creating what is termed an **arranged marriage**. When two wealthy families were involved, arranged marriages often seemed more like economic alliances than romantic partnerships. Indeed, historians suggest that there was little romance in many aristocratic marriages (Stone, 1977).

However, by the 1600s, the ideals of companionship and intimacy in marriage spread and arranged marriages became less common. (They always had been uncommon among the poorer classes, who had less to gain by an arranged marriage.) Still, many parents strongly influenced their child's choice. Records from Hingham, Massachusetts, show that prior to 1700 families tended to marry their oldest daughters first, then their next oldest, and so on, suggesting substantial parent involvement (Smith, 1973). Records from Andover, Massachusetts, indicated that in the 1600s and early 1700s, sons tended to marry only when their fathers were ready to turn over control of their land (Greven, 1970).

arranged marriage a marriage in which the parents find a spouse for their child by negotiating with other parents



Debutante balls offer upper-class parents the chance to introduce their daughters to young men from privileged backgrounds.

By the nineteenth century, parental influence over the timing of marriage and the choice of a partner had diminished substantially in the more prosperous classes. Even among the elite, it is likely that most children chose their spouse. Yet upper-class parents retained an indirect influence on their children's marriage partners through strategies that persist to this day. First and foremost was separate schooling. Wealthy children were much more likely to attend the nation's private boarding schools, where they met children from other wealthy families. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., heir to the most famous nineteenth-century fortune in the United States, met his future wife, Abby Aldrich, while attending Brown. Rockefeller certainly chose his wife; but he did so at an elite Ivy League university where, not coincidentally, the woman he chose came from a powerful Rhode Island family (Keller, 1991).

This pattern of separate education continued into the twentieth century. A study of marriage announcements in the Sunday *New York Times* from 1962 to 1972 found that 70 percent of the men and 84 percent of the women reported attending private schools, such as St. Paul's, Exeter, Andover, and Miss Porter's (Blumberg & Paul, 1975). Upper-class children were also more likely to attend elite universities: 52 percent of the men in the *Times* wedding announcements had attended an Ivy League college, and 29 percent of the women had attended one of the Seven Sisters colleges.

Until recently, at least, the vast majority of upper-class wives did not work outside the home. Still, wives of corporate executives and managers have had important roles to play in furthering their husbands' careers. The executive's wife was expected to host dinner parties, to attend charity events, to establish friendly relations with the wives of other executives, and to be ready to move to another city, should the executive be transferred. Not only her husband but also her husband's company expected that she would devote her efforts to his advancement. Hanna Papanek (1973) aptly labeled this phenomenon the "two-person career."

*Kinship Networks among
the Mexican Upper Class*

It is well established that lower-class family members frequently belong to extended kin networks that share resources and provide support to one another. These networks enable individuals to survive the economic crises of poverty by turning to their relatives for aid. Among the middle class, extended kinship ties are less important. Yet among the upper class, the importance of kinship often rises once again (Goode, 1982). Anthropologist Larissa Adler Lomnitz has demonstrated the importance of kin in two studies of the extremes of poverty and wealth in Mexico City. First, she studied poor people living in shanty-towns in the city—sprawling settlements made up of one-room shacks or brick cabins without running water. The residents of these neighborhoods survived by pooling their resources among a kinship network, much as the residents of Potter Addition or The Flats did (Lomnitz, 1977).

Lomnitz next studied kinship ties at the other end of the social spectrum, the Gómez family, which traces its roots back to Don Carlos Gómez, a nineteenth-century farmer and village trader (Lomnitz, 1987). In 1978, the Gómez family was a large, mostly wealthy network of business owners and their wives and children, comprising 360 people in five main branches. The businesses were privately held and family

controlled, rather than being publicly held corporations. Prominent family members hired cousins, nephews, and brothers-in-law from their own branch, and sometimes from others, to work in their firms. It was expected that sons, who started to work for their fathers at an early age, would eventually take over the businesses. But as long as the father was alive, he retained control.

These economic arrangements, Lomnitz found, were supported by—or perhaps better said, made possible by—the structure of family and kinship. The basic unit was the grandfamily, a three-generation family composed of a father and mother, sons and daughters and their spouses, and grandchildren. Although married couples lived in their own households, the grandfamily members lived near one another and met often. For instance, once a week they went to their father and mother's home for a family dinner. The women of the grandfamily saw one another almost every day; moreover, the women kept in contact with women in other grandfamilies, maintaining the links of kinship. In each generation of each branch, at least one woman seemed to specialize in maintaining the links of kinship; Lomnitz called these **centralizing women**. Their conversations included not only personal news but also news about family businesses in

their own branch and others. Frequent ritual events, such as christenings, first communions, marriages, and funerals, provided occasions for contact among members of different branches.

These extensive ties were useful for two reasons. First, wealthier family members were a source of employment and of money to invest in new business ventures. With so much wealth controlled by the family, individuals looked to their kin for economic opportunities. Second, kinship ties provided some protection against the risks of doing business. An individual could have trust, *confianza*, that a relative would abide by the terms of an agreement to produce, deliver, or sell goods. If a person broke a business agreement or was consistently unable to meet the terms of agreements, he would be subject to the ridicule and scorn of the other members of the family. Family ties thus enforced honesty and hard work.

Ask Yourself

1. Does your family participate in a close-knit kin network like those in Mexico? If so, for what reasons?
2. In the United States, wealthy families do not need the support of kin networks to do business. Why not?

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centralizing women

Upper-class women are instrumental in maintaining ties among wealthy kin, as a study of a Mexican elite family demonstrated. (See *Families in Other Cultures: Kinship Networks among the Mexican Upper Class*.)

In sum, the upper class have historically sought to conserve their wealth and transmit it to their children first by arranging marriages, then by controlling access to land, and most recently by controlling whom their children meet. And in this century, they evolved a style of marriage in which wives' rewards came through supporting their husbands' careers. Let me caution, however, that we

don't know the extent to which these patterns still hold as the twenty-first century begins. Starting in the 1960s, the elite universities enrolled more public school students and most of them became coeducational; consequently, the educational experiences of the children of the upper class may not be as distinctive as they were. Given the massive increases in the number of married women in the paid labor force—including increases in managers and professionals—it is not clear how many wives still devote themselves to the advancement of their husbands' careers. There is little current research on the upper class, in large part because sociologists are more interested in studying disadvantaged groups.

Social Class and the Family

Across all social classes, the changing economic roles of women and men over the past few decades have altered family lives. In the 1960s and 1970s, social commentators debated whether it was “necessary” for married women to work. After all, standards of living had been far lower in the first half of the twentieth century, and yet few married women had worked outside the home. However, the economic slide after 1973 more or less ended that debate. Among the working class, objections to married women working outside the home faded as decent-paying entry-level blue-collar jobs—the kind of jobs young husbands used to take—dwindled. Whereas in the 1970s wives' employment was seen by many working-class couples as a sign of a husband's failure to provide adequately for his family, now it is seen as a necessary and acceptable contribution.

Among middle-class couples with college educations, the employment situation has been better; still, as noted earlier, men's wages have stagnated until recently. Only two-earner couples have been beating inflation consistently. Moreover, the price of housing has risen far faster than wages, placing the American dream of homeownership out of reach of more and more single-earner couples. In the 1950s and 1960s, payments on a median-priced home required just 15 to 18 percent of the average 30-year-old man's income. That figure rose to 20 percent in 1973 and then doubled to 40 percent in 1987 (Levy & Michel, 1991). Consequently, for middle-class couples, too, wives' employment is seen as necessary and acceptable.

To be sure, there are other reasons for the increase in wives' employment over the past few decades. As birthrates declined after the baby boom, the number of years in which women have intensive childrearing responsibilities also decreased. Raising one or two children is simply not a full-time, lifelong job. Knowing this, many young women keep closer ties to the labor market before and even during the years in which they have small children. Having work experience is also prudent protection against the growing risk of a divorce and single motherhood.

Not all the forces for change have been economic. The rise in divorce, for example, has both economic and cultural roots (see Chapter 13). People's expectations about what constitutes a good life have also changed. In the past, young middle-class couples could, in theory, aspire only to the standard of living of the late 1940s and early 1950s, which for many consisted of an apartment or a small, one-story home, one car, a clothesline in the backyard for drying the laundry, one telephone, no stereo system, few restaurant meals, no airplane travel, and of course no VCRs or computers, and still keep one parent home all day. This is not

Extended families are more important to the working class than the middle class.



an appealing prospect in a country where people have gotten used to a higher standard that is promoted by advertising and reinforced by the media.

It is hard to foresee, therefore, any scenario under which fewer married women would work outside the home. To the contrary, further increases are likely. Moreover, the rise is likely to widen the income gap between middle-class families, on the one hand, and working-class or lower-class families. Inequality will increase because better-off families have recently sent, and are now sending, large numbers of women into the workforce. In contrast, wives from lower-income families were the first to enter the workforce in large numbers beginning at midcentury, a trend that actually reduced family income equality (Levy & Michel, 1991). Future growth in married women's labor force participation, however, will come increasingly from the middle class.

With regard to kinship, perhaps the most important difference among the lower-class, working-class, and middle-class families studied in this chapter is the relative autonomy of the parent-child unit from other kin. In lower-class families, ties between mothers and an extended network of kin are often a more important source of support to the mother than ties to the father of her children—even if the mother is still married to the father. In *Potter* Addition, a young mother's tie to her mother was usually stronger than her tie to her husband. In *The Flats*, mothers' ties to the fathers of their children commonly were weak, even nonexistent. Two-parent households are more often present in working-class families, yet ties to other relatives, particularly to the wife's mother, remain important sources of support. In contrast, the two-parent household of the middle-class family is typically independent of day-to-day support from other kin, in large part because family members and their kin have less need for economic assistance. Nevertheless, family members seem to retain strong obligations to assist relatives from whom they have descended—parents and grandparents—and relatives who descend from them.

Still, it is becoming increasingly difficult to speak of "the" social class position of a family anymore. The old way of measuring a family's social class, namely by

considering only the husband's occupation and income, is inadequate, given the greater number of dual-earner and single-parent families. In addition, it may be that husbands have a firmer grip on their class position than their wives. As will be discussed in the chapter on divorce, women who gain a high-social-class position by marrying men with high-paying jobs can lose that position if their marriages break up. After a divorce many middle-class women experience downward mobility as they reenter the job market after a long absence, receive modest child support payments, and perhaps sell their family home and move to a less-expensive neighborhood.

Social class is not the only way American society classifies families. Rather, racial and ethnic distinctions are also frequently made. It is to racial and ethnic differences in family patterns that we now turn.

Looking Back

- 1. What factors determine the social class position of families?** The degree of power, privilege, and prestige a family enjoys determines its social class position. There are four broad social classes in the United States: upper-class families, middle-class families, working-class families, and lower-class families. These classes are ideal types; in real life many families do not fit unambiguously into a single one of these categories. Because this social class structure developed in an era when most families had two parents but only the father worked outside the home, two-earner and single-parent families are particularly difficult to categorize.
- 2. How have changes in the American economy since the 1970s affected families?** The restructuring of the U.S. economy since the 1970s has caused a shortage of well-paid semiskilled and skilled jobs that do not require a college education—the kind of jobs less-educated young men used to rely on to support their wives and children. Now many of these jobs no longer exist, or have been moved to other countries where wage rates are much lower. Since 1973, the year of the oil price rise, family incomes have increased only among the growing number of families in which both husband and wife work for pay outside the home. Persistent poverty has become concentrated among single-parent families.
- 3. What do the kinship networks of many low-income families do for family members?** Lower-class families often depend on women-centered kinship networks, in large part because men cannot consistently earn enough to support their children. In these networks, poor people share what little they have with relatives and friends in order to cushion the hardships of poverty. But membership
- in a sharing network can prevent an individual from rising above poverty, because accumulating savings while at the same time providing financial help to others is difficult.
- 4. What are the characteristics of typical working-class and middle-class families?** Working-class kinship patterns are more likely to involve two-parent households than lower-class kinship patterns, but the larger extended family is still important. Studies dating back a few decades suggested that working-class wives remained very close to their mothers, with whom they exchanged support, and that the worlds of working-class men and women were highly segregated. However, these distinctive qualities of the working-class family appear to have lessened substantially over the past decade or two. Middle-class kinship patterns are distinguished by a greater emphasis on the parent-child unit compared with ties to other kin. Middle-class families feel most strongly obligated to spouse, parents, and children. The result is a kinship structure with a strong vertical axis of support from parents to children to grandchildren, and weaker horizontal axes of support to other blood relatives.
- 5. What are the distinguishing features of upper-class kinship patterns?** Upper-class kinship patterns are distinguished by greater parental influence over a child's choice of spouse, so as to preserve or enlarge the family's wealth and social position. Parents influence this choice by educating their children separately from the other social classes. Past studies have suggested that upper-class wives often work hard behind the scenes to advance their husbands' careers. How much of the traditional upper-class kinship patterns still exist today is not known.

Thinking About Families

1. In the twenty-first century, what makes a family “middle class” rather than “working class”?
2. Of all the reasons why has the distribution of family income become more unequal over the past few decades, which do you think is the most important? Why?
3. Many observers think that the movement of married women into the workforce is irreversible. Do you agree? Why or why not?
4. **The Public Family** What obligations do you think extended kin like grandparents, uncles, and aunts have to aid parents and children?
5. **The Private Family** How are the relationships between men and women different from social class to social class?

Key Terms

arranged marriage 000	middle-class families 000	social class 000
centralizing women 000	nonstandard employment 000	upper-class families 000
distribution of family income 000	poverty line 000	women-centered kinship 000
ideal type 000	power 000	working-class families 000
lower-class families 000	prestige 000	
	privilege 000	

Families on the Internet www.mhhe.com/cherlin

Note: While all the URLs listed were current as of the printing of this book, these sites often change. Please check our website (<http://www.mhhe.com/cherlin>) for updates.

It used to be that you had to go to the library and sort through government publications to find statistics on family income and poverty. Now most of the key statistics are available on-line, and you can download and print many reports. For statistics on poverty, the place to go is the U.S. Bureau of the Census home page, www.census.gov. Click on *Subjects A-Z*, then *P*, then *Poverty Data*. The Bureau’s annual statistical reports on poverty, from which Figure 4.2 was tabulated, are in Portable Document Format (PDF) and can be downloaded

using Adobe Acrobat software (which itself can usually be downloaded free from the Adobe web site, www.adobe.com). Historical tables are available as well. How does the Census Bureau measure poverty?

The Population Reference Bureau is sponsoring a site that provides statistics about families, along with options for graphing and displaying information: www.ameristat.org. Click on “Income and Poverty.” Then select information about racial and ethnic differences. What percentage of poor families are white, African American, or Hispanic?

