



Northeastern University  
*Online*



## Week 2—Part I

Basic Elements, Change and Diversity in the Family

Families vary dramatically across cultures, subcultures, and historical periods. Earlier societies changed much more slowly and were much more homogeneous. Once industrialization began, technology changed many things including the structure of families. The United States is currently the most culturally diverse industrial society and Japan is the least diverse. There is much less consensus about family form and functioning in this society than there was in earlier centuries and than there is in Japan and other more homogeneous societies.



## Conceptual definitions of the family

- Institution
- Kinship
- Marriage

As a cultural universal, families have important elements that are found in all families. These include:

- The family as an institution, all families are cooperative and function in order to oversee the bearing and raising of children
- The idea of kinship, all societies and all families have definitions of kinship. Kinship is based on blood (and, today, genes), marriage, adoption. In preindustrial societies, blood was critically important. I remember being in a museum in Germany where they had a “chastity belt.” This was a metal device that a woman was forced to wear while her husband was away—trading or at war usually. This was seen as a solution to the possibility that the woman could become pregnant by another man. Once that kind of practice was abandoned, thank goodness, paternity was never certain. Now we have “paternity” tests that can answer this age-old question for anyone. This is an excellent example of how technology can change the family. We can also point to birth control as a technology that has changed the family. How has birth control changed families?
- Or, how do people decide who is a legitimate member of their family?



## Cultural Diversity and Family Variation

### Variation in family patterns:

- Family types:
  - Nuclear
  - Extended/consanguine
  - Modern nuclear
    - One or two parents and their children
  - Blended nuclear or extended
  - Families of affinity

The early hunting and gathering families were generally nuclear. Most of these societies were at least somewhat nomadic because they had to go to where the plants and animals were and this varied by the season. As people settled down and began to grow crops and/or herd animals the family became more stable and grew to become the extended family. This pattern is still found in agricultural environments. The extended family includes parents and children and other kin. This could be grandparents, and the brothers and sisters of the parents and grandparents, etc. In Thailand, for example, first cousins are also called “brothers” and “sisters.” This shows the importance of the extended family to that society. With Industrialization the family tended to become nuclear again and has tended to become single parent families. Families are more likely to have two parents when there is an economic advantage. If only one parent works and the other does not contribute to the economic survival of the family, marriages are less likely to occur or to persist. Also, the partner that does not contribute economically is not seen as or may not see themselves as a “valuable” member of the family. Blended families are much more common in this society now. That is the remarriage of at least one of the parents and their children to another spouse. Sometimes both partners have children. This practice produces “stepparents” and “stepchildren.” Blended families always have to cope with differing ideas and practices from their previous households. For example, we often hear discussions about the appropriate role for a stepparent to play in relation to their stepchildren. In general, the idea is not to try to replace or alienate the children from the absent parent.

•Families of affinity are groups of people that do not have blood ties or legal standing but who construct relationships through interaction. They choose to see themselves as belonging together and as “family.” I have an “Aunt Jean” who is really my mother’s best friend. I also have some best friends that I like family to me. In one case, the daughter calls me her “other mother.” This is probably more likely for me since I am an only child married to another only child and we do not have children.



## Family variation (continued)

### Power relationships

- Patriarchy vs. matriarchy

### Marriage patterns

- Endogamy vs. exogamy
- Monogamy vs. polygamy

Families also vary in a number of additional ways:

- The most important dimension is probably the variation in power relationships. The vast majority of cultural family forms are patriarchal. Most societies are patriarchal and the family forms reflect that. In fact, statistics show that the family form that is most likely to fall into poverty is the single-female-head-of-household type.
- Endogamy is marriage between people from the same social category. This can include dimensions such as caste, estate or social class, race, ethnicity, locality, etc. In modern societies endogamy is becoming less common because people move around more (geographic mobility) and they often experience mobility in the workplace. This workplace mobility can be up or down (vertical) or changing jobs at the same level (horizontal).
- Polygamy is a type of marriage that incorporates at least three adults. Most preindustrial societies have some sort of polygamy. The most common type is **polygyny** which is a marriage in which the male has more than one wife. **Polyandry** is the type of family in which the female has more than one husband. Both types have declined in modern times. This is in part a result of the fact that, in industrialized societies, it is more difficult for one person to support more than one spouse, a fact that is also reflected in the higher divorce rates. It is also true that people are more individualistic and are exposed to a variety of cultural practices from around the world. This trend means that monogamy, a form with only two partners, has become much more common.



## Family variation (continued)

- Residential variation
  - Patrilocality
  - Matrilocality
  - Neolocality
- Descent
  - Patrilineal
  - Matrilineal
  - Bilateral

Families also vary in terms of where the family will reside and how kinship is defined across generations.

•Residential variation includes three basic patterns:

- Patrilocality means that the married couple will reside with or near the husband's family. This was true in Ireland in earlier centuries. However, the emigration of so many Irish to this country was due not only to famine but to the fact that farms could only be divided a few times to accommodate the needs of all the male children. When this became true, many younger male children emigrated from Ireland.

- Neolocality is a cultural norm in which the married couple lives apart from both sets of parents. This is what happened for many immigrants to this society. It is also true when economic conditions make it more difficult for native children to make a living near their parents. As a result, this is more common in industrial societies. I was born in Southern California but came to Boston for graduate school (at Northeastern). This is a typical choice today, one that is driven by economic considerations.

- Matrilocality, of course, is a pattern in which the married couple lives with or near the wife's family. You can find a family form which is patriarchal and matrilocal. The rarest form would be a matriarchal and patrilocal family pattern.

- In some traditional societies there is the expectation that the new couple will live with either the husband's or the wife's family, thus preserving the extended family while allowing economic considerations to enter into the decision.

- Descent, or decisions about how to trace kinship also vary. Each of these patterns determines such things as responsibility for others and inheritance.

- Patrilineal families trace descent through males.

- Matrilineal families trace descent through females.

- Bilateral families trace descent through both females and males.

- Modern industrial societies tend to trace descent through both males and females.