5.1: Diversity of Families

Check-in Time!

What counts as family to you? Are there people in your life you consider family who are not necessarily related to you in the traditional sense?

In J.K. Rowling's famous Harry Potter novels, the boy magician lives in a cupboard under the stairs. His unfortunate situation is the result of his wizarding parents having been killed in a duel, causing the young Potter to be subsequently shipped off to live with his cruel aunt and uncle. Although family may not be the central theme of these wand and sorcery novels, Harry's example raises a compelling question: what, exactly, counts as family?

Figure 1: A traditional family has a somewhat narrow definition that includes only relationships of blood, marriage, and occasionally adoption. More recently, in many societies, the definition of family has expanded. A modern family may include less traditional variations based on strong commitment and emotional ties.[1]
The definition of family changes across time and across culture. Traditional family has been defined as two or more people who are related by blood, marriage, and—occasionally—adoption (Murdock, 1949). Historically, the most standard version of the traditional family has been the two-parent family. Are there people in your life you consider family who are not necessarily related to you in the traditional sense? Harry Potter would undoubtedly call his schoolmates Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger family, even though they do not fit the traditional definition. Likewise, Harry might consider Hedwig, his snowy owl, a family member, and he would not be alone in doing so. Research from the US (Harris, 2015) and Japan (Veldkamp, 2009) finds that many pet owners consider their pets to be members of the family. Another traditional form of family is the joint family, in which three or more generations of blood relatives live in a single household or compound. Joint families often include cousins, aunts and uncles, and other relatives from the extended family. Versions of the joint family system exist around the globe including in South Asia, Southern Europe, the South Pacific and other locations.

In more modern times, the traditional definition of family has been criticized as being too narrow. Modern families—especially those in industrialized societies—exist in many forms, including the single parent family, foster families, same-sex couples, childfree families, and many other variations from traditional norms. Common to each of these family forms is commitment, caring, and close emotional ties—which are increasingly the defining characteristics of family (Benokraitis, 2015). The changing definition of family has come about, in part, because of factors such as divorce and re-marriage. In many cases, people do not grow up with their family of orientation, but become part of a stepfamily or blended family. Whether a single-parent, joint, or two-parent family, a person’s family of orientation, or the family into which he or she is born, generally acts as the social context for young children learning about relationships.

According to Bowen (1978), each person has a role to play in his or her family, and each role comes with certain rules and expectations. This system of rules and roles is known as family systems theory. The goal for the family is stability: rules and expectations that work for all. When the role of one member of the family changes, so do the rules and expectations. Such changes ripple through the family and cause each member to adjust his or her own role and expectations to compensate for the change.

Figure (PageIndex(2)): There are many variations of modern families, including blended or stepfamilies where two families combine. In a combined family the roles of individuals may be different than in their original family of orientation.[2]

Take, for example, the classic story of Cinderella. Cinderella’s initial role is that of a child. Her parents’ expectations of
her are what would be expected of a growing and developing child. But, by the time Cinderella reaches her teen years, her role has changed considerably. Both of her biological parents have died and she has ended up living with her stepmother and stepsisters. Cinderella’s role shifts from being an adored child to acting as the household servant. The stereotype of stepfamilies as being emotionally toxic is, of course, not true. You might even say there are often-overlooked instructive elements in the Cinderella story: Her role in the family has become not only that of servant but also that of caretaker— the others expecting her to cook and clean while in return they treat her with spite and cruelty. When Cinderella finds her prince and leaves to start her own family—known as a family of procreation—it is safe to assume that the roles of her stepmother and stepsisters will change—suddenly having to cook and clean for themselves.

Gender has been one factor by which family roles have long been assigned. Traditional roles have historically placed housekeeping and childrearing squarely in the realm of women’s responsibilities. Men, by contrast, have been seen as protectors and as providers of resources including money. Increasingly, families are crossing these traditional roles with women working outside the home and men contributing more to domestic and childrearing responsibilities. Despite this shift toward more egalitarian roles, women still tend to do more housekeeping and childrearing tasks than their husbands (known as the second shift) (Hochschild & Machung, 2012).

Interestingly, parental roles have an impact on the ambitions of their children. Croft and her colleagues (2014) examined the beliefs of more than 300 children. The researchers discovered that when fathers endorsed more equal sharing of household duties and when mothers were more workplace oriented it influenced how their daughters thought. In both cases, daughters were more likely to have ambitions toward working outside the home and working in less gender-stereotyped professions.

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