



Social Class and Family Inequality

Looking Forward

Families and the Economy

The Growing Importance of Education

Diverging Demographics

Age at Marriage

Childbearing Outside of Marriage

Marriage Market

Divorce

Differences in Early Adulthood

Family Life and the Globalization
of Production

Developed Countries

Developing Countries

Defining Social Class

Bringing in Gender and Family

Social Classes and Status Groups

The Four-Class Model

Three Status Groups

Social Class Differences in Family Life

Assistance from Kin

Kinship among the Poor and Near Poor

Chronic Poverty and Kin Networks

The Limits of Kin Networks

Kinship among the Nonpoor

Social Class and Child Rearing

Social Class and Parental Values

*Concerted Cultivation versus Natural
Growth*

Social Class and the Family

Looking Back

Study Questions

Key Terms

Thinking about Families

Families on the Internet

Boxed Features

FAMILIES AND THE GREAT RECESSION:

Job Losses and Financial Strain

FAMILIES AND PUBLIC POLICY: *Homelessness,
by the Numbers*

Looking Forward

1. How have changes in the American economy since the 1970s affected families?
2. How have the family lives of people with college degrees diverged from the family lives of those with less education?
3. How has the globalization of production affected family life in developed countries and in developing countries?
4. What factors determine the social class position of families?
5. Are there social class differences in kinship?
6. Are there social class differences in how parents raise children?

In the fall of 2011 the Census Bureau released its annual report on income and poverty (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2011f). With the country still in the throes of the Great Recession, the numbers were predictably bad. Between 2007 and 2010 the income of the median household had declined by 7.1 percent. (The *median* household income is the midpoint: half of the other households had higher incomes and half had lower incomes.) As for poverty, 15.1 percent of Americans lived in households with incomes below the federal poverty line in 2010. Poverty was even worse for American children: 22.0 percent of them lived in households below the poverty line. But one other figure drew the attention of the media: The average male full-time worker earned less in 2010 than did his counterpart in 1973. A generation had gone by in which the size of the American economy grew and the productivity of the work force improved. And yet the average worker had made no progress.

Who is that average worker? It is typically someone with a high school degree but no college degree. A generation ago, we called these workers “blue collar,” after the iconic chambray shirt that workers wore to their factory jobs. Today, many of those factory jobs are gone. Every old city has seen the closing of factories that had formerly provided fulltime jobs at good wages to workers without college educations. 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)

Advances in communications and transportation allowed managers to close plants such as Singer and import their goods from factories in developing nations in Latin America, South Asia (for example, India), Southeast Asia (for example, Indonesia or the Philippines), or East Asia (for example, China) where wages were much lower. American factory workers lost their jobs, while opportunities grew for the well-educated managers who imported and marketed goods. In other industries, computers allowed employers to replace less-skilled workers with machines, including workers who used to answer

the telephone. When I call Amtrak to make a train reservation, a perky voice answers by saying, “Hi, I’m Julie, Amtrak’s automated agent,” and continues to give me options until I yell “operator” several times and am finally connected to a human being. Julie could not function without a voice recognition system that depends upon fast, powerful computers and complex software that did not exist until about two decades ago. Before then, sales agents, most of whom did not have college degrees, answered the phones. Jobs like theirs are also disappearing. At the same time, jobs for the well-educated people who design systems like Amtrak’s are increasing.

The result has been a **polarization** of the labor market since the 1970s: Job opportunities have increased for the most-educated workers and for the least-educated workers, while declining for workers with moderate levels of education and skill (Autor, Katz, & Kearney, 2006; Kalleberg, 2011). Managers (such as business executives) and professionals (such as lawyers) are still needed, as are the low-skilled service workers (such as restaurant staff) who cook their meals and the sales workers (such as cashiers) who sell them their clothes. Managers and professionals tend to have high salaries, while service and sales workers typically have low wages. Meanwhile the percentage of workers who have jobs in manufacturing has declined as plants like Singer closed. And the percentage who work in moderately-skilled white-collar jobs like the people who used to answer Amtrak’s phones has declined, too. The American occupational structure looks more and more like an hourglass, bulging at the top and the bottom but narrow in the middle.

Employment has also become more precarious, with less security and shorter periods of employment. For example, employers increasingly contract out work to temporary agencies instead of hiring their own workers. They downsize quickly when demand for their products or services drops. Workers, in response, feel less loyalty to their employers and are more likely to change jobs when an opportunity arises. What some call the psychological contract between employers and employees—employers promise job security and advancement while employees promise loyalty and hard work—strengthened in the mid-twentieth century as American manufacturing prospered; but it has since broken down (Kalleberg, 2011). As a result of the greater polarization and precariousness of employment today, people feel anxious and insecure about jobs. Young people entering the labor market, especially those without college degrees, have less confidence that they can find a good job today. And that feeling of insecurity can lead them to postpone starting a family. These developments were made even worse in the late 2000s by the Great Recession. (See: *Families and the Great Recession: Job Losses and Financial Strain*.)

polarization (of the labor market) a growth of job opportunities at the top and bottom of the job market but a lessening of opportunities in the middle

Families and the Economy

In fact, since the 1960s, average wages have stayed the same or decreased for workers without a college education because of the movement of factory jobs overseas and the spread of automation. Only the college educated workers have experienced substantial wage growth since then (Katz & Autor, 1999). The result is a great increase in what I will call **family inequality**, the extent to which some families obtain more income and wealth than do others.

family inequality the extent to which some families obtain more income and wealth than do others

Families and the Great Recession

Job Losses and Financial Strain

As the Great Recession hit, the unemployment rate rose sharply, doubling between 2007 and 2009 and remaining near 9 percent through 2011. And if you had any doubt that the Great Recession caused a jump in unemployment among family members, a glance at the graph on this page will convince you. It shows the percentage of families with at least one member who was unemployed for each year from 1995 to 2010. The American economy was in good shape in the late 1990s, and the percentage dropped below six in the year 2000. It varied up and down after that until it rose in 2008—just as the recession hit—and then spiked to 12 percent in 2009. It increased further in 2010.

What did unemployment mean for families? Sociologists Anne H. Gauthier and Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., reported on the responses to a 2009 national survey of adults who had children under age 18 living with them (Gauthier and Furstenberg, 2010). The authors noted that many families were already stressed prior to the recession. As discussed elsewhere in this chapter, some of the jobs that used to support workers without college degrees have moved overseas or disappeared into computer chips. As a result, families in the middle of the American income distribution have had their share of the economic pie squeezed; in contrast, families near the top of the distribution have seen their share of the pie grow. Moreover, the amount of debt families owe has also risen, as credit card usage increased and as banks, in the run-up to the recession, offered home mortgages to families with limited means to pay them. Thus, when the recession struck, many families already were operating

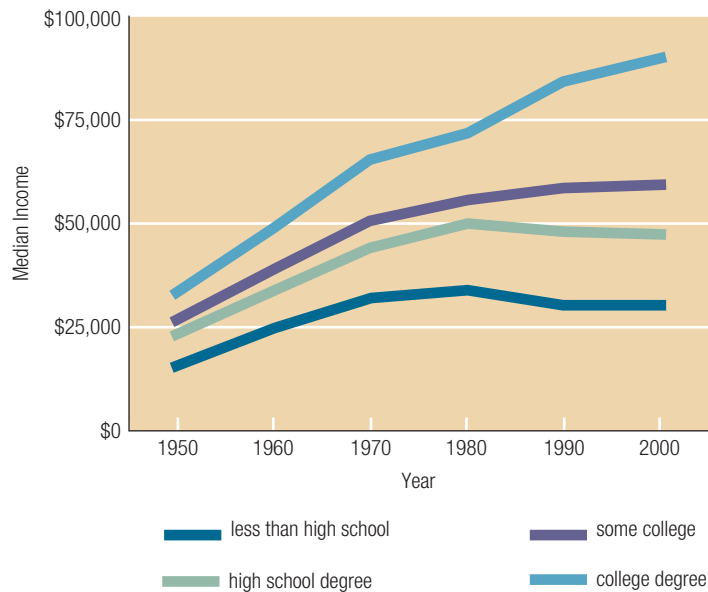


with little margin for error. When asked, “If somebody in your household were to lose his/her job (including yourself), how many months do you think your family could manage without borrowing money?” 31 percent of individuals in the survey responded *none*.

So when unemployment increased, many already-stressed families took a hit. When individuals in the survey were asked, “Have the last 12 months been better, worse, or the same when it comes to the financial situation of your family?” half replied that it had been worse. Although people at all levels of education reported a rise in unemployment, the situation was worse for those with less education. For instance, individuals with a high school diploma were almost twice as likely to feel financially strained as were individuals with college degrees.

The consequences of financial strain were tangible. For example, 5 percent of those who reported financial strain

had experienced the foreclosure of their homes. Now, 5 percent may not seem like a lot, but it means that if you lived in a neighborhood where most residents felt the strain of the recession, one out of every twenty neighbors would have lost their homes. Another 5 or 10 percent, according to the survey, had put their house up for sale. And 2 to 5 percent declared bankruptcy. Multiply these effects across all of the distressed neighborhoods in America and you will quickly see how severe the financial effects of the recession were. And that was just in 2009. As the economic downturn lasted through 2012, many more American families lost their homes or went bankrupt. The Great Recession refused to leave. And two economists projected that the percentage of Americans living below the poverty line would remain above the pre-recession level until the end of this decade (Monea and Sawhill, 2011).

**FIGURE 4.1**

Adjusted family-of-four income medians, by education, 1950 to 2000. (Source: Fischer & Hout, 2006)
 Note: Income expressed in 1999 dollars and adjusted for family size (see Fischer & Hout, 2006).

Moreover, we will see that families that are doing well are increasingly headed by married, well-educated couples, whereas the ones that are not doing as well are increasingly headed by cohabiting couples or single parents, most of them without a college education.

THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION

Over time, the amount of education that people obtain has become a stronger predictor of the types of families that they live in and how well-off they are. In contrast, education was a much less important factor in determining family income a half-century ago. Figure 4.1 shows the median income for a typical family of four, by education of the family head, for the period 1950 to 2000. You can see that the lines start closer together, and then in the 1970s they begin to move farther apart. As the lines diverge, the income advantage of families with college-educated family heads increases over families whose heads had less education; and the income disadvantage of families whose heads did not graduate from high school grows. In 1950 a family whose head had a college degree earned about twice as much as a family whose head had not completed high school. In 2000 that family earned about three times as much.

There is another important reason why the families of the college-educated were pulling away from other families: they were more likely to have two parents in the household. Over the past several decades, single-parent families have increased in the United States due to rising rates of divorce and to more childbearing outside of marriage. But the increase has been faster among the less-educated. Of all families with children whose heads had a college degree in 2011, 13 percent were headed by an unmarried mother. In contrast, 30 percent of families with children whose heads did not have a college degree were headed by an unmarried mother (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2011s). Single-parent families must rely on the money that one parent brings in;

moreover, women's earnings (most single-parent families are headed by women) are usually lower than men's. Two-parent families, in contrast, can pool the incomes of both adults. Since the 1980s, the median income of married-couple families in which both spouses work has increased much more rapidly than has the median income of other types of families (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2011t). Because the families of the college educated could rely on two earners more than families with less education could, the gap between the incomes of the college educated and the less educated widened (Western, Bloome, & Percheski, 2008).

Quick Review

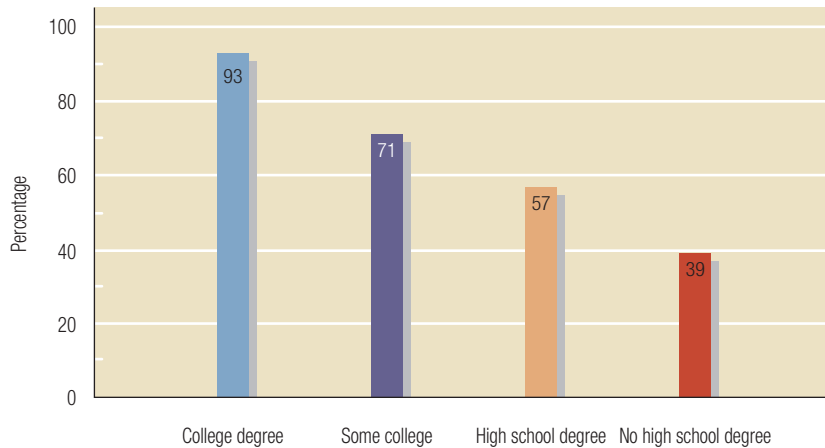
- Family inequality has increased over the past several decades.
- The kinds of jobs that used to allow high-school-educated adults to support a family have become scarce because of automation and the globalization of production.
- Widespread higher education is a recent phenomenon; high-school degrees were uncommon and college degrees rare in 1900. College attendance rose rapidly in the second half of the 1900s.
- The incomes of families, where the head of the family is college-educated, have risen more rapidly than the incomes of families when the head of the family is less educated.
- A person's education is a more important predictor of the kind of family life he or she leads than it was in the past.

DIVERGING DEMOGRAPHICS

Since about 1980, the family patterns of people with college degrees have moved in a different direction than those of people with less education. Today, college-educated Americans are more likely to marry (although they take longer to do it), more likely to wait until after marriage to have a first child, and less likely to divorce than are less-educated Americans.

Age at Marriage People with four-year college degrees are displaying a pattern we might call catch-up marriage: Until age 25, relatively few of them marry, which is consistent with the societywide trend toward later marriage. But in their late twenties and thirties, their rates of marriage exceed those of the less educated (Martin, 2004). By the time they are in their forties, a higher proportion of them have married than is the case for people without college degrees (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001). In other words, if you just followed a group of young adults until their mid-twenties, you would conclude that college graduates have lower marriage rates, and you might even predict that fewer of them will ever marry. You would be missing, however, the action that occurs later on, after men and women have completed their higher education and begun to establish careers, which more than compensates.

Childbearing Outside of Marriage Most college-educated women also wait to have children until after they are married—childbearing outside of marriage remains almost as uncommon among them as it was a half-century ago (Ellwood & Jencks, 2004). Among women without college degrees, however, and especially among women who have never attended college, far fewer

**FIGURE 4.2**

Percentage of women who were married when they gave birth, by education, 1997–2001. (Source: Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008)

wait until marriage to have children than was the case a half-century ago. Figure 4.2 shows how the percentage of women who are married when they give birth varies by education, based on a 2002 national survey. You can see how sharply the percentage falls as education decreases. It is as if marriage and childbearing—so closely linked in Western culture—have become separate phenomena among the least educated, with childbearing often preceding marriage by years. One way of thinking about this difference is to view Americans as following different ways of fitting childbearing into the life course.

A study of young women in low-income Philadelphia-area neighborhoods found that many of them think it unlikely that they could find suitable marriage partners (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). They see few men who are earning steady, decent incomes—still a requirement for a husband in the United States—and who are free of the problems such as substance abuse and illegal activity that often come with limited earning potential. Consequently, they think that to postpone having a child until one is married carries a high risk of never having children—a risk they are unwilling to take. And they do not think that having a child outside of marriage will hurt them subsequently in the marriage market. Moreover, they do not expect to attend college. So they often follow the strategy of having children at a relatively early age without marrying and then thinking seriously about marriage many years later. The authors, Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas (2005), write:

Unlike their wealthier sisters, who have the chance to go to college and embark on careers—attractive possibilities that provide strong motivation to put off having children—poor young women grab eagerly at the surest source of accomplishment within their reach: becoming a mother.

Young women who are confident that they will graduate from college, on the other hand, can reasonably expect to find a suitable husband afterwards and to have children after they marry. Most of them can make the conventional strategy—finish your education, marry, and then have children—work successfully. Thus, the most- and least-educated groups tend to follow different strategies for ensuring that they will have children. The groups in the middle of the educational distribution ranges are somewhat more likely than

the college educated to have children outside of marriage, and they increasingly do so in cohabiting unions rather than marriage. I will discuss the role of cohabitation in more detail in Chapter 7.

assortative marriage the tendency of people to marry others similar to themselves

The Marriage Market Education has become a more important factor in who marries whom over the past half-century or so. Sociologists call the tendency of people to marry others similar to themselves **assortative marriage**. In the 1930s, religion was a more important determinant of who marries whom than was education: A college-educated Protestant was more likely to marry a Protestant high school graduate than to marry a college-educated Catholic. But since the middle of the twentieth century, college graduates have become much more likely to marry each other than to marry people with the same religion but less education. Religion remains a factor, but the college educated have largely removed themselves from the rest of the marriage market (Kalmijn, 1991). And since the 1970s, people who did not complete high school have become less likely to marry people with more education; rather, they have become more isolated in the marriage market (Schwartz & Mare, 2005). In the middle of the educational distribution, on the other hand, more marriage across educational groups exists (for example, a marriage between a high school graduate who did not attend college and someone who attended college but did not get a bachelor's degree). In sum, the marriage market today seems to be stratified by education into three submarkets of people who choose partners primarily like themselves: people with college degrees; people who graduated from high school and may have attended college but did not get a bachelor's degree; and people who did not graduate from high school. To be sure, some marriages still cross these boundaries, but on the whole these divisions exist.

Divorce The trends in divorce also show a divergence. In the 1960s and 1970s the risk of divorce was rising for all groups, but starting about 1980 the risk began to decrease. The drop was greatest for college graduates. By the 2000s, college graduates had a substantially lower lifetime risk of divorce than the less-educated; perhaps one-third of all marriages will end in divorce. Those with a high school degree but not a college degree may have the highest rates (Isen and Stevenson, 2001; National Center for Family and Marriage Research, 2011b). So, as is the case with marriage, the risk of divorce also seems to be stratified, with a college-educated group at the low end. We will consider divorce in more detail in Chapter 12.

Differences in Early Adulthood To sum up this picture of diverging demographics, several trends in marriage, childbearing, and divorce suggest that the family patterns of individuals with different levels of education have moved in different directions in the past few decades:

- College graduates delay marriage but ultimately have a higher lifetime probability of marrying than do people without college degrees.
- People increasingly choose a spouse with a similar level of education.
- College graduates are much less likely to have a child without marrying.
- The chances of divorce have been declining for college graduates.



A couple sees their children off to school before going to work. Dual-earner families have shown the greatest income gains in recent decades.

It is likely that the restructuring of the American economy, which improved the life chances of those with the most education and reduced them for those with the least education, influenced this divergence. But it did not act alone; rather, a broad cultural shift probably played a role: Alternatives to marriage (having a child as a single parent or cohabiting) have become more acceptable, and the meaning of marriage has changed. I will return to the theme of cultural change in marriages and partnerships in Chapter 7.

In any event, people with different levels of education increasingly experience the life stage of early adulthood in different ways. The college educated continue their schooling into their twenties, postpone both marriage and childbearing, but eventually marry and have a lower risk of divorce. Individuals who did not graduate from high school are increasingly isolated in the marriage market, and are much more likely to have a child prior to marrying. In addition, when and if they marry, their risk of divorce is high. Finally, individuals with a high school degree and perhaps some college credits are in the middle range with regard to marriage, childbearing outside of marriage, and may have the highest risk of divorce.

Quick Review

- Since about 1980, the family patterns of people with different levels of education have diverged in several ways.
- People with college degrees have been delaying marriage but ultimately marrying at higher rates, waiting until they are married to have children, and experiencing declining divorce risks.
- People who have not graduated from high school are more likely to have children prior to marrying, less likely to marry, and if they marry, more likely to divorce.
- Over the past several decades, people have become increasingly likely to choose a spouse with a similar level of education.
- The less educated are increasingly following a path of having children before marrying, whereas the well educated tend to follow the conventional path of finishing their education, marrying, and only then having children.

FAMILY LIFE AND THE GLOBALIZATION OF PRODUCTION

Overall, the globalization of production—the movement of manufacturing and clerical jobs to developing countries—has altered family life in the developed countries that have sent jobs elsewhere and in the developing countries that have received jobs. The effects are different but profound in both. They show that the globalization of production is having a world-wide effect on family life.

DEVELOPED COUNTRIES

In the developed countries that have lost jobs to the developing world, there is a growing economic gap between the college-educated and the less-educated, as shown by the diverging demographics we have just reviewed for the United States. A sharp educational differential in childbearing within marriage is also apparent in the United Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, other European countries (Kiernan, 2011). College-educated individuals still have access to the managerial and professional jobs that have remained in the developed nations even as factory and clerical work has left. As a result, this group is doing relatively well economically. In the United States, at least, the college-educated are increasingly living family lives that we might call **neo-traditional**. Marriage rates are high; and most children are born to married couples; and divorce rates have dropped. This marriage-centered style of life harks back to the mid-twentieth century, although with some differences: unlike the 1950s family, couples may cohabit before they marry, and most wives work outside the home. Far from being a cultural vanguard, college-educated young adults are leading more conventional family lives.

High school educated Americans, on the other hand, face a much weaker job market because the kinds of mid-level jobs that their parents used to take have moved to countries where workers earn far less. Consequently, they hesitate to marry and increasingly have children before marrying. Their risk of divorce is higher. Meanwhile, for Americans without high school degrees, globalization has not altered family life as much. As was true before globalization, their work opportunities are largely confined to low-level service jobs that do not pay well, have few fringe benefits, and are often insecure.

neo-traditional a style of family life centered on marriage but which may be preceded by cohabitation and in which wives work outside the home

Their levels of marriage remain low and a majority of them have children outside of marriage. In sum, college-educated adults and their families are emerging as the most advantaged group in the globalization of production in the United States and probably in other developed countries as well (although the Great Recession has hurt all young adults lately). In contrast, this great transformation of employment has constrained the family lives of less-educated adults and their families, leaving them disadvantaged by globalization.

DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

But what about family life in the developing countries that have been on the receiving end of the globalization of production? Here, too, family lives are changing. The most important factor is the increasing employment of women. Employers in many developing countries seem to think that women will work for lower wages than men and that they are easier to control than are men (for instance, less likely to complain or to go on strike) (Benería, 2003; Trask, 2010). Women dominate the work force in occupations such as assembling electronic goods or making clothes. Some women work in the **formal sector** of the economy, where jobs have characteristics such as long-term labor contracts, legal protections, and fringe benefits such as sick leave, and where the activities of employers are regulated by local or national law. But an increasing number of jobs are in what is called the **informal sector** of the economy. This term does not mean relaxed or laid-back; rather, it signifies that employment is precarious and outside of the law: jobs are based on verbal agreements rather than contracts; they are unregulated by local or national law; they are easily ended; and they do not have fringe benefits. Among women workers, some of these jobs are done at home, as when employers drop off parts for electronic devices or toys and later pick up the assembled products. It is generally less expensive for employers to use informal sector labor because wages are lower, there is no factory to be maintained, and work can be ended whenever demand for the products declines. Employers often subcontract tasks to middlemen who in turn hire a predominantly female, home-based work force.

The great increase in women working for pay has brought both benefits and costs to family life in developing countries. As for the benefits: Women's wages, although very low by developed country standards, have allowed them to raise their family's standard of living, such as by improving their children's diet or purchasing a refrigerator. Studies show that when wives have control over money they tend to spend more of it on their children than when husbands have control of it (Lundberg, Pollak, & Wales, 1997). Women who are earning wages have been able to gain more independence and bargaining power in their households (as have employed women in developed countries—see Chapter 8). Their increased earnings have made their husbands less likely to physically abuse them, and in more extreme circumstances they have been able to use their earnings to escape abusive marriages (see Chapter 11). Moreover, working at home has allowed them to combine earning money with the childcare and household work that they are still expected to do.

Yet the costs have been substantial, too. The wages are so low, and employment so unstable, that a family may need multiple sources of income to subsist from day to day, entailing long hours of work by both parents. Especially when

formal sector the part of the economy in which workers have labor contracts and legal protections and employers are regulated

informal sector the part of the economy in which workers have no labor contracts, no legal protections, and no employer regulation

they are employed in the informal sector, women may have little control over when they work and how long they work. The lack of institutionalized child care centers or subsidies sometimes means that younger children are left in the care of older ones (see Chapter 8). A daughter may be forced to drop out of school in order to care for her siblings, thus ending her chance to get a good education (Trask, 2010). Many husbands have not increased their share of the domestic work, creating a crushing double burden for wives whose jobs may require long working hours and six- or seven-day work weeks (Heymann, 2006).

Unlike families in the United States and other developed countries, then, families in developing countries cannot easily be sorted into winners and losers in the globalization of production on the basis of characteristics such as education. Although one could undoubtedly find some families for whom the effects have been completely positive and others for whom the effects have been completely negative, there are many more for whom the effects have been both positive *and* negative. The ability to earn money through factory work or home production, even if wages are low, is an opportunity that women in low-income countries cannot easily pass up. It can increase their independence and boost their children's standard of living. But it can also make their lives increasingly harried by the long hours of paid and unpaid work that make up their day. It can leave their children without adult care and can cut short the education of caregiving daughters. It can leave women exploited by employers in the informal sector who are not bound by contracts and labor laws. The globalization of production is a decidedly mixed blessing for the families of the developing world.

Quick Review

- The globalization of production has had a world-wide effect on family life.
- In developed countries such as the United States, college-educated individuals are living a neo-traditional family life centered on marriage.
- Also in developed countries, the less-educated are marrying less, having more children outside of marriage, and divorcing more than the college-educated.
- In developing countries women are working for pay in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy.
- The great increase in women working for pay has brought both benefits (more independence and bargaining power) and costs (child care problems) in developing countries.

Defining Social Class

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

life chances the resources and opportunities that people have to provide themselves with material goods and favorable living conditions

It's clear from the previous sections that people who differ in the level of education they have attained also tend to experience the job market and family life differently. When sociologists think about differences in economic resources, they often use the concept of **social class**, an ordering of all persons in a society according to their degrees of economic resources, prestige, and privilege. All agree that income and wealth are core elements of this ordering. But the German sociologist Max Weber added other standards (Gerth & Mills, 1946). One is the broader idea of **life chances**, the resources and opportunities that people have to provide themselves with material goods and favorable living conditions. People's life chances may be augmented by the higher education



A manager at a fast-food restaurant chain both supervises workers and is supervised by higher-level executives.

they obtain or their family's contacts in the labor market. Their life chances may be limited by discrimination or racial segregation. So education can be considered an economic resource, too. A second concept is a more subjective category: the **status group**, a group of people who share a common style of life and often identify with each other. They are sometimes distinguished by prestige—the honor and status a person receives—such as the prestige of medical doctors or university professors. They often differ in their level of privilege—that is, their access to special advantages such as attendance at elite universities. Are the concepts of social class and status groups useful in helping us understand the variations in family life today?

status group a group of people who share a common style of life and often identify with each other

BRINGING IN GENDER AND FAMILY

The great theories of class were developed at a time when relatively few married women worked outside the home. Theorists focused on the kinds of jobs men typically did: physical labor, factory work, supervising, or managing. Therefore, these theories really refer to the class positions of individual men (Acker, 2000). But if you are interested in the pooling of resources and the sharing of living conditions, you might want to analyze the class location of a family. For instance, if your ultimate interest is children's living conditions, the family would be a more appropriate unit to study than the individual parent. In the days when most families had two parents and only one (almost always the husband) worked for wages, one could assign to a family the class location of the husband. One could speak of a "working-class" family and mean a family in which the husband worked in a factory and the wife did not work outside the home. (Note that wives' unpaid labor inside the home isn't counted as "work" in these theories; we will discuss this problem in Chapter 8.)

But this simple procedure doesn't work well any more. Because of the great increase in married women's work outside the home, both the husband and the wife work for pay in the majority of married-couple families. Studies in the United States and other Western nations suggest that, depending on

the definition of social class, husbands and wives may belong to different classes in up to one-third of all two-parent, two-earner families (Sørensen, 1994). Moreover, many women work in the expanding service sector (i.e., sales, clerical, personal services) of the economy. It's harder to assign a class position to these jobs, in part because they tend to pay less than the jobs that men with comparable education obtain. Consider a woman who works as a salesclerk in a department store. She might be considered part of the "middle class" as long as she is married to a husband with a well-paying job. But if the marriage ends and she becomes a single parent, her standard of living is likely to drop. Whether she necessarily leaves the middle class is unclear—she has less income, but she retains the same level of education and many of the same friends and interests.

Yet when people are asked in surveys whether they are "working class" or "middle class," they give ready answers. How, in fact, do husbands and wives decide what social class they are in? Research suggests that both spouses consider the husband's and the wife's incomes and weigh them about equally when deciding what class they are in. But women and men diverge in their thinking about education and occupational prestige: Women tend to consider theirs and their husband's more or less equally, whereas men tend to weight their own more heavily (Davis & Robinson, 1988, 1998; Yamaguchi & Wang, 2002).

SOCIAL CLASSES AND STATUS GROUPS

Clearly, thinking about families in class terms is complex, but it also seems unavoidable. Let us examine the four social class categories commonly used in sociological research: upper class, middle class, working class, and lower class. But think of them as ideal types rather than concrete realities. Introduced by Weber, the **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.

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

The Four-Class Model Americans understand the four-category scheme, but they overwhelmingly say they are either middle class or working class. For instance, in the 2010 General Social Survey (GSS), a biennial national survey of adults, 3 percent of the respondents said they were upper class, 42 percent said middle class, 47 percent said working class, and 9 percent said lower class (Davis & Smith, 2010). Both extremes apparently sound unpleasant to people, probably because of the stigma of being "lower class" and the embarrassment of admitting to being "upper class." By most reasonable criteria, however, the lower class is larger than 9 percent. As noted earlier, 15.1 percent of Americans had incomes below the official poverty level in 2010.

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

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



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

in other social classes, and they may be instrumental in maintaining ties to wealthy kin.

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 a 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.

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, one or two cars, enough money to enroll children at a state or community college, and so forth. Working-class men tend to hold manual jobs in factories, automobile repair shops, construction sites, and so forth, that involve little or no authority over others. 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 less likely to work a full week and have 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.

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

Homelessness is the kind of issue that tugs at people's heartstrings. Whether they believe that poverty is the fault of the individual (the poor don't work hard enough) or of society (too little opportunity, too much discrimination), most people think that everyone ought to have a place to sleep. They are troubled by homelessness and at once appalled and fascinated by reports of individuals and families who live in the streets or in shelters. But although the problem has been long on empathy, it has been short on numbers. Ever since the issue gained currency a few decades ago, good information on the homeless population has been scarce. It is, after all, difficult to count people who sleep in alleyways and move in and out of shelters.

Only in the past several years can we finally get good estimates of the homeless. That's because the Department of Housing and Urban Development has now set up a system of reports from community institutions across the country. On a single night in January 2010, the report says, there were 649,917 homeless people sleeping in shelters or on the streets (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development,

2011). Nearly two-thirds of them were individuals, and more than one-third were in families. Homelessness is an urban phenomenon. For instance, in 2007 8 out of 10 homeless people in the state of New York were in New York City. One of every five homeless people in the country lived in New York City, Los Angeles, and Detroit.

The 2010 study also reported that 1,593,150 individuals used shelters for the homeless or transitional housing at some point during 2010. Of this total, 567,334 adults and children arrived in families; the rest arrived alone. Shelter families overwhelmingly consist of single mothers and their children. Single parents are more vulnerable to homelessness because they do not have a second adult earner to help pay the rent. The homeless parents who use shelters and their children tend to be young; over half of the parents are between 18 and 30. Forty-two percent of the sheltered homeless family population is African American, and 22 percent is Hispanic.

Figure 4.3 shows where families in shelters were living the night before they first entered. Despite the image of a homeless family walking into a shelter after a night

sleeping on the street, few families—only 3 percent—came to shelters from places “not meant for human habitation.” Parents try hard not to live on streets or in abandoned buildings or in their cars because, if they are discovered, the child welfare agencies will sometimes take their children and put them into foster care. An additional 19 percent of families came from another shelter or transitional housing. This total of 22 percent of families represents the only ones that were actually homeless before arriving at the shelter. Twenty-one percent had stayed at their own apartments or houses; presumably they had just been evicted or left because they were unable to pay the rent or the mortgage. When they lose their own housing, parents try to double up with friends or relatives. In fact, 41 percent of the families in shelters had stayed with relatives or friends the previous night. But their presence can strain the already-stretched resources of their hosts' households; and after they have worn out their welcome, if they have no other options, they will enter a shelter.

Surprisingly, the number of homeless people counted in the single-night estimates

lower-class families

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

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. They are susceptible to homelessness (see *Families and Public Policy: Homelessness, by the Numbers*). 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.

Three Status Groups Although these four categories seem ingrained in both social scientific research and popular thought, the definitions are so broad that it is very difficult to draw a clear distinction between middle-class and working-class families or between working-class families and lower-class families.

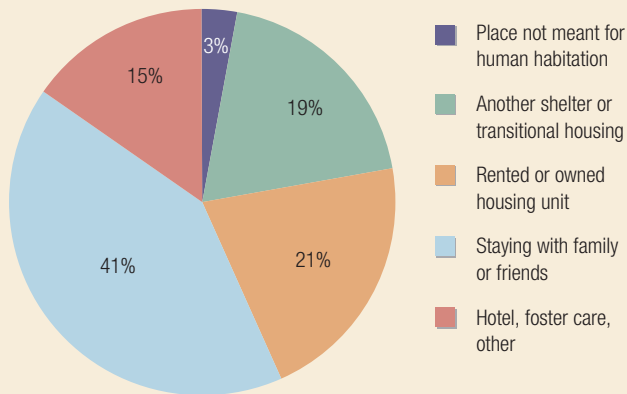


FIGURE 4.3

Living arrangements of families the night before entering a homeless shelter, 2010. (Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2011)

dropped between 2007 and 2010 despite the Great Recession, which might have been expected to increase homelessness. The lack of increase may reflect more effective government programs, which now emphasize putting individuals into supportive housing first and dealing with the personal or family problems after that (Lee, Tyler, and Wright, 2010). Or it could mean that the shelters were full to capacity and

the counters missed some of the homeless who were on the street.

Either of the two estimates of the size of the homeless population, the number homeless on a night in January or the number who rely on a shelter during the course of the year, is a small percentage of the total population with incomes below the federal poverty line. This doesn't mean that homelessness isn't a serious problem or

that we should ignore it. On the contrary, we should strengthen our efforts to combat it. But the numbers do suggest that for every poor homeless person there are many poor people who are precariously housed—behind on the rent or trying the patience of a friend whose living room couch they are sleeping on. Helping this larger number of people stay housed is an important part of the solution, for if the precariously housed lose their places to live, their numbers could overwhelm the already-stressed shelter system. The homeless problem and the larger poverty problem are not as separate as they may seem.

Ask Yourself

1. Has anyone in your family ever been forced to move into a friend's 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?

www.mhhe.com/cherlin7e

Moreover, given the increasing importance of education, it may be more useful to group people by the amount of education they have. These groupings are more like Weber's status groups. The first group comprises people with a college degree. I will draw this boundary based on two arguments: First, the restructuring of the American economy has increased the life chances of those with college degrees to a much greater extent than those without college degrees; and second, the college educated form a status group, in the Weberian sense of sharing a common style of life, because their patterns of marriage, divorce, and childbearing appear to be diverging from the patterns of people without college degrees. About one-third of all adults between the ages of 25 and 54 have a four-year college degree. In addition, some individuals who have a two-year college degree are able to attain this style of life.

The second group comprises people who graduated from high school and most of those who have attended college but did not obtain a four-year degree; they are the most difficult to categorize in terms of social class because they

sometimes share the characteristics of the groups above and below them. The third group comprises people who did not graduate from high school, whose family patterns in some respects are diverging from both groups above them. These three status groups are roughly equivalent to what people think of as the “middle class,” “working class,” and “lower class,” respectively; but these labels are so imprecise that I will avoid them for the most part.

Quick Review

- Social scientists use the concept of social class to order all individuals in a society.
- Max Weber maintained that one needs to consider status groups as well as classes to understand how a society is stratified.
- Wives and husbands both consider each other's income, education, and occupation in identifying their social class, but wives do so more than husbands.
- Sociologists typically assume that four broad social classes exist: the upper class, middle class, working class, and lower class.
- Differences in life chances and styles of living suggest that three status groups defined by education may be as useful as the four broad social classes.

Social Class Differences in Family Life

Earlier in the chapter, Figure 4.1 showed that the median incomes of families with different levels of education have diverged since the 1970s: The incomes of families whose heads are college educated have risen compared to other families, and the incomes of families whose heads have not completed high school have fallen compared to other families. Subsequent sections showed that parallel patterns of marriage, divorce, and childbearing have diverged. There are other long-standing social class differences that are important but have not necessarily diverged. One is the kind of assistance family members received from relatives living in their household or elsewhere. A second is the way parents approach child rearing. They are not completely different, of course; similarities run across status groups 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.

ASSISTANCE FROM KIN

As differences in whether people have children before marrying show, there is variation around the norm of the two-parent-and-children conjugal family. Families differ not only in terms of marriage but also in terms of their ties to other kin, both the kin that a person is born to or acquires at marriage and the kin that some people construct from distant relatives, friends, partners, partners' families, and so forth. These kinship patterns differ by social class, although some of the class differences appear to be fading or overstated.

Kinship among the Poor and Near Poor 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. (See *Families and the Great Recession: Lessons from the Great Depression*, in Chapter 2.) In the cultures of all



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

industrialized nations, men have been viewed as the main earners; providing a steady income has been seen as their responsibility. Rightly or wrongly, women's economic contribution has been viewed as secondary, although this perception may be changing as women 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 poor and near-poor families, their authority in their homes decreases, their self-respect declines, and other family members treat them with less respect as well. Chapter 9 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.

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

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

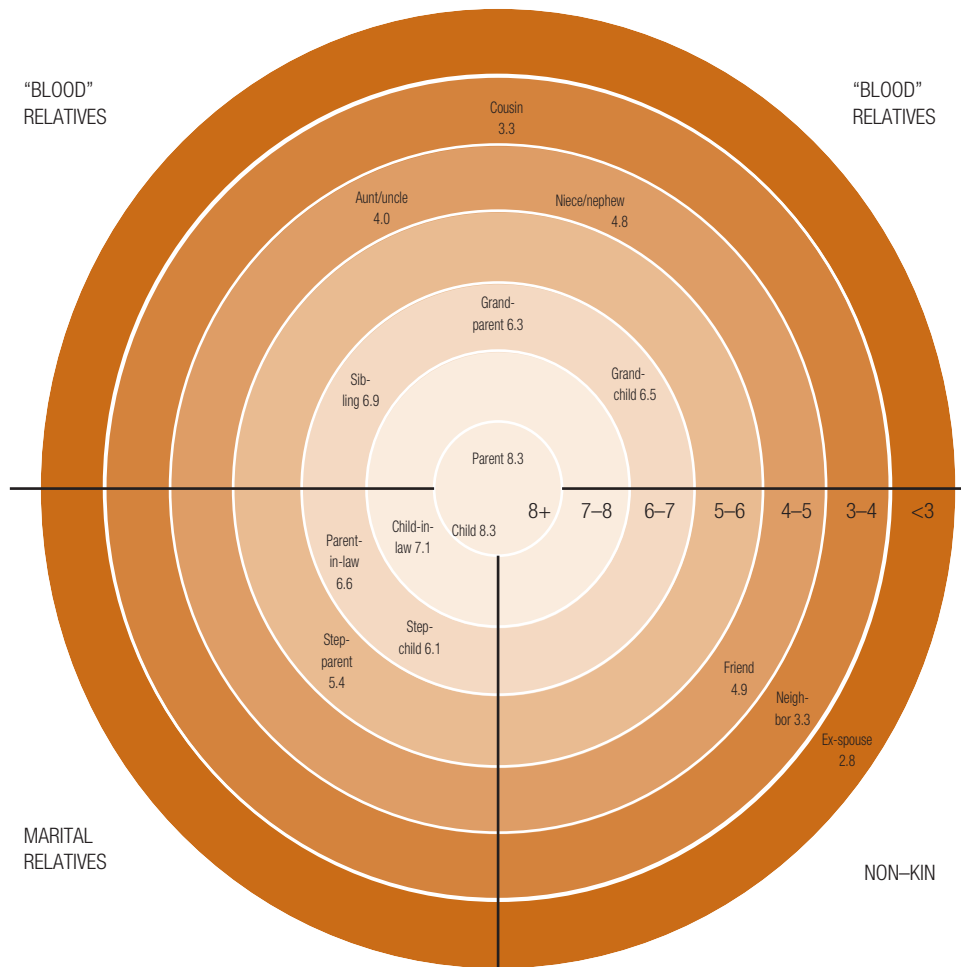
provide whatever assistance they can. Sisters or aunts who are themselves poor will nevertheless give food or money because they know that in the future they may need emergency help. In this way, the kinship networks of the poor spread the burdens of poverty, cushioning its impact on any one household 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 a complex network of relatives and friends that extended over many households (Stack, 1974).

The Limits of Kin Networks Yet membership in such a kinship network is not without cost. 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.

Moreover, it's not clear how widespread these networks are today. Studies show that very disadvantaged parents tend to receive less support from kin, either because the people in their networks have fewer resources to provide or because they are not in a network (Harknett & Hartnett, 2011). In general, low-income parents are more likely to receive practical support from their kin, such as child care assistance, than to receive financial support, whereas middle-class parents are more likely to receive financial support (Swartz, 2009). Assistance from kin takes different forms among the poor and nonpoor but seems to be important for both.

Kinship among the Nonpoor The core of kinship among the nonpoor in the United States has been the conjugal family of wife, husband, and children, at least ideally (Schneider & Smith, 1973). 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 poor. 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). Alice and Peter Rossi presented 1,393 mostly white people whom they identified as "middle class" with a set of "vignettes": brief, hypothetical descriptions of relatives and friends who were experiencing

**FIGURE 4.4**

“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)

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 4.4. The closer to 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.

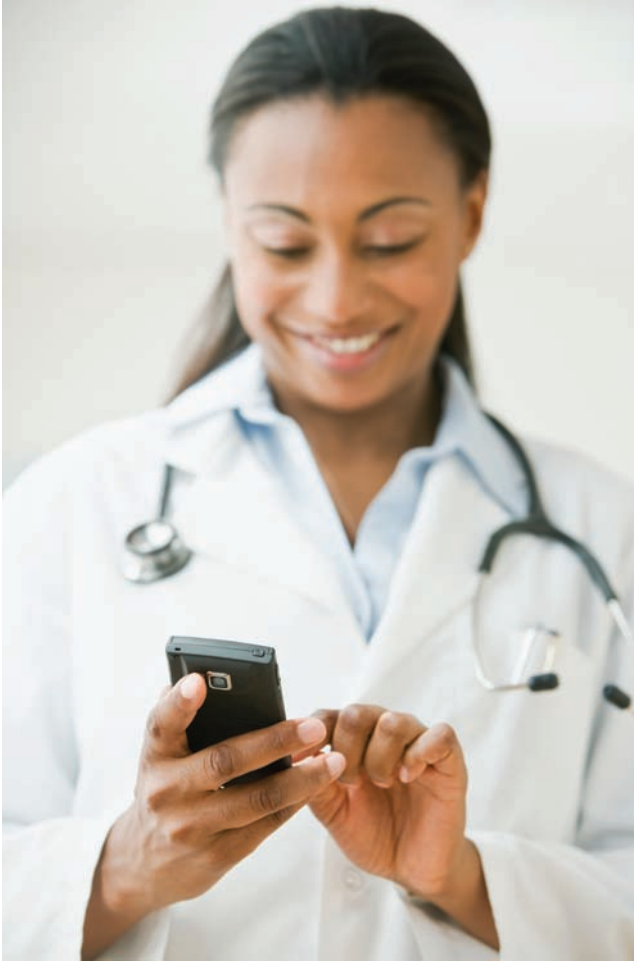
Note also that the highest levels of obligation were expressed toward a person's parents and children. Indeed, all the relatives in the two circles surrounding the hub are related to a person through a child, a parent, or a spouse. This pattern suggests that adults felt the most obligation to the members 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 middle-class 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 (Bengston, 2001). 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.

SOCIAL CLASS AND CHILD REARING

Families also differ by social class in how they raise their children. In general, college-educated parents often act in ways that encourage autonomy and independence, whereas less-educated parents more often encourage conformity and obedience to (and distrust of) authority. Not all parents fit this pattern, of course; there is substantial variation within social classes. Moreover, as the twentieth century progressed, parents in all social classes moved toward emphasizing independence (Alwin, 1988). On average, though, intriguing class differences remain.

Social Class and Parental Values Beginning in the 1960s, Melvin Kohn pioneered a line of research showing the connections between the conditions a person experiences on the job and his or her child rearing values (Kohn, 1969). He noted that working-class employees (by which he meant blue-collar industrial workers), for the most part, are closely supervised, work with physical objects (as would carpenters), and perform simple tasks repetitively (as on an automobile assembly line). It is important for workers in these



In contrast to attitudes prevalent a half-century ago, wives (and their husbands) view working for pay outside the home as a necessary and proper activity.

jobs to obey their supervisors and to accept the discipline of doing repetitive tasks. In contrast, middle-class workers (by which he meant white-collar professional and technical workers), are less closely supervised, usually work with data (as would computer programmers) or people (as would personnel managers), and perform a variety of tasks (as would physicians). Middle-class jobs, Kohn argued, encourage more independence than working-class jobs and often reward creativity and individual initiative.

When working-class and middle-class parents are asked to select the most important characteristics that children should have, their preferences reflect their occupational positions. Working-class parents are more likely to select obedience to authority, conformity, and good manners, whereas middle-class parents are more likely to select independence, self-direction, curiosity, and responsibility (Alwin, 1990). Working-class parents emphasize the kinds of characteristics their children would need if they were to enter blue-collar jobs. To work on an assembly line for 40 years requires obedience and conformity; someone who is creative and independent might have a harder time tolerating the job. In contrast, to be a successful manager requires independence and initiative. Thus, each class socializes its children to fill the same positions their

Middle-class parents tend to actively enhance their children's skills.



parents have filled. Because of his or her conformist upbringing, a child from a working-class family may be less successful as a manager than a self-directed child from the middle class. In this way, socialization by parents both is influenced by and helps to perpetuate the social class divisions in the United States.

Concerted Cultivation versus Natural Growth More recently, sociologist Annette Lareau intensively studied 12 families with third-graders and found class differences in the way parents view the task of raising children (Lareau, 2003, 2011). These differences, which are consistent with Kohn's research, applied to both African American and European American children in her sample; at least for these families, class, more than race, determined parents' approaches to child rearing. Lareau defined a group of families in which the parents had jobs requiring college or more advanced degrees as "middle class" and a group with jobs requiring less education as "working class" or "poor." Middle-class families tended to actively enhance children's talents, opinions, and skills, a cultural style she calls "concerted cultivation"—as if parents were cultivating a garden so its plants would grow as well as possible. Working-class (and poor) parents, on the other hand, did not focus on developing their children's special talents;

rather, they emphasized providing a safe environment and love and letting children grow on their own. Lareau calls this cultural pattern the “accomplishment of natural growth.” In everyday life, these different styles affected children’s time use, language use, and family ties. Middle-class parents filled their children’s weeks with a whirlwind of formal activities such as lessons, sports, tutoring, and play dates, whereas working-class parents were often content to let their children hang out at home or in the neighborhood. Middle-class parents talked with their children more, reasoning with them rather than telling them what to do. Children from working-class and poor families had closer ties to uncles, aunts, and children than did middle-class children.

As a result, argues Lareau, middle-class children have advantages in school and, later, in the job market: They are more assertive with authority figures such as teachers and coaches, they are more verbal, and they have a more independent sense of self. Working-class and poor children (and their parents) are less likely to speak up for themselves and challenge authority; they are more deferential and less trusting of authority. Middle-class children gain a sense that they are entitled to a stimulating, rewarding daily life, whereas working-class and poor children get a sense that their opportunities are constrained. So as they grow up, middle-class children are in a better position to achieve a middle-class lifestyle themselves. The main point, for Lareau as for Kohn, is that the social class of the family you grow up in affects the way you think about school, authority figures, and work.

Quick Review

- Poor families often depend on women-centered kinship networks, in large part because men cannot consistently earn enough to support a family.
- Nonpoor families typically center on a wife, husband, and children who have obligations to their parents and their grandchildren but are otherwise independent of kin.
- Middle-class parents tend to emphasize independence and self-direction in raising children.
- Working-class parents tend to emphasize conformity and obedience to authority in raising children.

Social Class and the Family

A half-century ago, most families with children, rich or poor, had two parents and one earner. As recently as the early 1970s, half of all poor families consisted of married couples; by 2010 one-third were married-couple families (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2011e). Meanwhile, a majority of well-off families have two parents and two earners. Thus, the association between the type of family you live in and your social class position is stronger today than in the past. This great sorting out of families by social class has occurred for both economic and cultural reasons. On the economic side, two developments stand out: the movement of married women into the workforce and the declining employment prospects of men without college educations. On the cultural side are the rise in expressive individualism and people’s higher aspirations for material goods.

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 those without college educations, 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 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 couples with college educations, the employment situation has been better; still, 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). Housing affordability deteriorated further through the early 2000s (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2009c). Consequently, for college-educated couples, too, wives’ employment was seen as necessary and acceptable. (In the mid-2000s the availability of so-called subprime mortgage loans to families with modest incomes may have created the illusion that homes were more affordable, but many of the families that took out these loans defaulted on the payments, triggering the Great Recession of the late 2000s.)

Concurrently, adults in a more individualistic culture were freer to choose not to marry or to end marriages. Having children outside of marriage became more acceptable. People’s expectations about what constitutes a good life also changed. 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 DVD players or computers—and still keep one parent home all day. This is not an appealing prospect in a country where people have gotten used to a higher standard of living that is promoted by advertising and reinforced by the media.

With regard to what women and men do in families, however, class differences may have lessened over the past few decades. To be sure, the women-centered kinship networks of low-income families remain distinctive. Yet not all low-income families have functioning networks, and the number of single-mother families has increased among the nonpoor as well. The distinctive working-class gender segregation and resistance to wives’ employment, presented in several widely read mid-twentieth-century studies (Bott, 1957; Gans, 1962; Rubin, 1976), seems to have faded. Child-rearing patterns do still seem different, with college-educated parents instilling in their children a sense of independence and of entitlement to a rewarding life, while less-educated parents tend to stress obedience, safety, and natural growth. These class differences in child rearing could affect the quality of education that children obtain and the type of occupations they will eventually get.

Until the 1980s, families at all educational levels seemed to move in parallel as rates of marriage, divorce, and childbearing rose and fell in waves.



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

Since then, however, we see evidence that families at the top and bottom of the social ordering are moving in different directions. The college educated appear to be consolidating their gains in the restructured economy: Young adults postpone marriage while obtaining advanced educations, then they marry spouses who also have college degrees, and only then do they have children. Their marriages have become more stable in recent years, quite possibly reflecting their improved economic position. In contrast, individuals without high school degrees seem increasingly marginalized. They are isolated in the marriage market, as if shunned by those with better economic prospects. They often have children years before marrying, if they marry at all. And their marriages still have a high risk of divorce. These are not encouraging trends in a nation that thinks of itself as a land of equal opportunity.

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

Looking Back

1. **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—and has increased the importance of education. Since the 1970s, incomes have increased the most among families headed by college graduates and the least among families headed by persons who did not graduate from high school.
2. **How have the family lives of people at the top and bottom of the social order diverged recently?** People with college educations are more likely to marry than are people with less education, although they marry at later ages. Their marriages are less likely to end in divorce, and they are less likely to have a child outside of marriage. In general, people are more likely than in the past to marry someone with a similar level of education. The typical life course of people who obtain college degrees involves completing one's education, then marrying someone else

who is a college graduate, and then having children. For a person who does not graduate from high school, the life course may involve having children well before marrying, having a restricted choice of marriage partners, and having a high risk of divorce if one does marry at all.

3. **How has the globalization of production affected family life in developed and developing countries?** In developed countries such as the United States, the globalization of production has benefited the college-educated, who are adopting a neo-traditional style of family life, while disadvantaging the less educated, for whom marriage is becoming less central to family life. In developing countries, globalization has had positive effects such as increased income and negative effects such as childcare problems, as more women have begun working for pay.
4. **What factors determine the social class position of families?** Sociologists agree that income and wealth are important. In addition, they examine whether the worker belongs to a status group with shared levels of prestige, privilege, and lifestyle. Since many families have more than one earner, the social class position of families can be ambiguous. Therefore, the four social classes that are usually defined—upper, middle, working, and lower—should be considered as hypothetical models (ideal types). Recent trends suggest that

it may be useful to use people's educational levels to define a set of three status groups.

5. **Are there social class differences in kinship?** Poor and near-poor families are distinctive because many of them consist of single-parent units embedded in kin networks although these networks may be less prevalent than in the past. These networks share resources in order to ease the burdens of poverty. Nonpoor families consist mainly of two-parent households that are relatively independent of kin except for vertical ties to grandparents and grandchildren.
6. **Are there differences across classes in how parents raise children?** Poor and working-class parents tend to emphasize obedience and conformity in raising children, whereas middle-class parents are more likely to emphasize independence. As a result, sociologists suggest, poor and working-class children are not as assertive with authority figures such as teachers. They also show less self-direction and independent initiative. Middle-class children develop a sense that they are entitled to a rewarding life. These child-rearing differences tend to steer poor and working-class children toward blue-collar and service work and to steer middle-class children toward professional and managerial work.



Go to the Online Learning Center at www.mhhe.com/cherlin7e to test your knowledge of the chapter concepts and key terms.

Study Questions

1. Why has the globalization of production affected workers without college education more than the college educated?
2. How has the growth of single-parent families affected the incomes of families with different levels of education?
3. What are the strengths and limitations of the four-class (upper, middle, working, lower) model of social status in the United States?
4. What is a “status group” and how does it relate to the concept of social class?
5. How has the role of education in the marriage market changed over the past several decades?
6. Why might a young woman with little education choose to have a child without marrying?
7. What are the costs and benefits of the sharing networks commonly used by low-income families?
8. What advantages accrue to children with college-educated parents who engaged in “concerted cultivation” of them?

Key Terms

assortative marriage 116	lower-class families 124	status group 121
family inequality 111	middle-class families 123	upper-class families 122
formal sector 119	neo-traditional 118	women-centered kinship 127
ideal type 122	polarization	working-class families 123
informal sector 119	(of the labor market) 111	
life chances 120	social class 120	

Thinking about Families

The Public Family

What obligations do you think extended kin like grandparents, uncles, and aunts have to aid parents and children?

The Private Family

How are the relationships between men and women different from social class to social class?

Families on the Internet www.mhhe.com/cherlin7e

Note: While all the URLs listed were current as of the printing of this book, these sites often change. Please check our Web site (www.mhhe.com/cherlin7e) for updates.

Ten years ago there was little good data on homelessness. Advocates virtually made up numbers that were repeated in the press and in popular debates. That has now changed. The main reason is the reporting system that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has set up. The Department publishes an annual report to Congress that is based on the information they obtain from this system. To obtain the most recent report, enter this phrase into a search engine: “Annual homelessness assessment report to Congress.” You will see a list of the annual reports; choose

the most recent one. In the report, you can find the number of people who were homeless on the single night during that year, usually in January, when all of the agencies search for the homeless and report the results to HUD. You can also learn the total number of people who spent at least one night in an emergency shelter during the year. The 2010 report shows a surprising decline, noted in this chapter, in chronic homelessness during the Great Recession. See Exhibit 2-4 in <http://www.hudhre.info/documents/2010HomelessAssessmentReport.pdf>