

Chapter 1

What Is a Family?



Every morning in homes across America, alarm clocks blare on bedside stands, showers fill with steam, and coffeemakers spew out fresh java. As the day passes, front doors open and shut, mail slots open and close, and dishes slowly pile up in sinks waiting once again to be washed and returned to cabinets. As the evening winds to a close, lights turn on and off, television channels flip, computers click and clack, and, finally, alarms are again poised to blare the next day.

While all the events of day-to-day life pass routinely from sunup to sundown in these houses and apartments across the land, it's the people within—the members of the family—who make these rooms a home for all who dwell there. We all know what we mean when we talk about family, but we may not all mean the same thing. What exactly is a family? Answering this question is my first challenge in writing this book. And I've learned that it's not as easy as I had first thought to clearly define this word.

In my years as a psychiatrist, I've evaluated thousands of individuals and spent countless hours interviewing hundreds of family members. By now, you would think, I'd have it all figured out. Well . . . actually . . . no, I don't. At least not that simply. Through the course of my clinical experience, one glaring truth emerges: no two families are the same. And certainly no two families function in exactly the same way. There's something both frightening and

inspiring in that finding. Frightening because it means that as a psychiatrist and researcher of human behavior, I cannot apply one standard or formulaic set of techniques to my work with the many families who come to me for help. Inspiring because it demonstrates the diversity and breadth of experience, culture, and style that define the uniqueness of the word *family*.

FAMILY THROUGH THE AGES

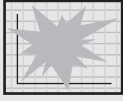
Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* has twenty-seven entries for the word family.¹ The definition "a group of persons of common ancestry" is as clear and acceptable a definition as any, I suppose. But in her article "Family Versus Familia, Historical Definitions of the Family," Rachael Hughes reminds us that "our modern usage of the word family as a unit of relatives is relatively new." She explains further that the word grew from the Latin term *familia*, meaning "household," which included everyone—friends, relatives, servants, and slaves—living in that domicile.²

This is interesting stuff. It means there was a time when the word family did not apply to pesky in-laws who lived in their own household in another city, two days' wagon ride away. Or even to a beloved brother who established his own family two doors down. A little more research, and I found that it was not until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that family began to connote the intimacy of what we now call a nuclear family.

Before we move forward to discuss *happy* families in Chapter 2, I think there's something to be learned about our own families by taking an historical look at the family unit.

EVOLUTION OF THE FAMILY

A brief overview of family life through the ages makes it clear that one definition of family does not fit all. We could begin in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve and their sons Cain and Abel



SECRETS FROM RESEARCH

Family Buzzwords

These popular terms regarding the family were introduced to our language only over the last two hundred years or so:³

1796: *in a family way* (pregnant)

1809: *family circle*

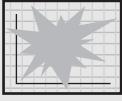
1856: *family man* (one devoted to wife and children)

1966: *family values*

as our first family and find lies, betrayal, and murder—a rocky start to unity and happiness. In prehistoric times, the so-called family unit existed purely for survival purposes; during their short and brutish lives, the men were hunters and warriors who spent much of their time away from home and hearth, and the women bore children and died young. Jumping forward to the Middle Ages, in upper-class families, marriage was commonly a strategic arrangement to promote military, economic, or political goals. And then during the Industrial Revolution, factories lured fathers, mothers, and even children out of their homes with the promise of economic stability. The evolution of society and civilization has routinely changed the purpose, structure, and definition of the family.

I readily admit that I'm not an historian. I'm a shrink. But I find that diving into the history of the formations of families is critical for a good understanding of why and how families function. My search through the history books makes one thing glaringly clear: families adapt to and are defined by the culture that surrounds them. The meaning of family and the behavior expected within a family are very closely tied to their historical context.

This evolution of the family image continues even today. Many people challenge the notion that the family is composed of a husband



SECRETS FROM RESEARCH

Women in the Mosou Chinese Culture

What we might think of as the conventional male-headed household is not conventional for everybody. In the Mosou culture of Himalayan China, for example, women are considered leaders in the community, are granted special status when they reach thirteen years of age (as well as a house of their own), and can choose sexual mates at will. In this culture, when women give birth to a child, the father has no ownership of the child at all. As women grow in status, they pass on their power to other women, including the power to have or reject a man in their lives.

and wife with biological children, and perhaps a grandparent or two. Although this depiction certainly does fit the Merriam-Webster definition of “a group of persons of common ancestry,” the twenty-first-century family is that and then some. An increasingly large proliferation of types, dynamics, and relationships based on sexuality, culture, religion, ethnicity, ideology, and other crucial variables can be seen all around us and is also quite evident in my own clinical practice.

THE MODERN FAMILY

The most recent and obvious shifts in today’s modern family have occurred in the changing of gender roles within the family. In many families, the male is no longer the unquestioned head of the tribe—nor does he wish to be. He and his female partner more equitably divide the household roles—both taking greater responsibility for the care of the home and the children. Also, today both the male

and female heads of the family may choose to work outside the home to earn a living, leaving the care of the children to caretakers who may or may not be related or members of the household.

Further, not all of today's families are bound by a common ancestry. Consider stepparents and stepchildren; adoptive parents and children; foster parents and children; childless married couples; unmarried but cohabiting couples; infertile couples with egg- and sperm-donor children; same-sex couples; same-sex couples and their adopted, foster, or egg- and sperm-donor children. Whew!

This extended view of the family begins to look more like the pre-seventeenth-century version of the family as "everyone living in the household," regardless of ancestry. So again, I face the dilemma of defining family before I can move on to Chapter 2!



SECRETS FROM RESEARCH

Commodore Perry's Unavailable Wife

In our society, monogamy between committed partners is considered an essential element in a happy family. But that's not the case in all cultures. Stories of early expeditions to the North Pole tell us that when Commodore Perry arrived with his wife to set up base camp in the Arctic, an Eskimo chief commented on how attractive Mrs. Perry was. Later, Perry was surprised to find that this chief was insulted when Perry thanked him for the compliment and continued his work. It turns out that in Eskimo culture, if someone compliments your wife, you're supposed to offer her up to have sex with the flatterer.⁴

Why do I suspect that this quaint idea will never catch on in twenty-first-century Western culture?

WHAT A FAMILY IS NOT

As I was writing *The Secrets of Happily Married Men* and *The Secrets of Happily Married Women*, I tried my best to include what I felt was a representative view of married couples. I made an effort to include stories of clients who weren't necessarily white or middle or upper class, but who instead were representative of a cross section of American life. I patted myself on the back, convinced that I had a broad worldview. Yet as I spent more time talking to my clients, meeting with trainees in psychiatry programs in New England, and traveling around the country giving lectures, an unsettling realization began to set in.

Whereas I thought I had taken an inclusive approach to discussing how to have a happy marriage, it was clear that there was a lot more to this "family" thing than I realized. Certainly, I can say without hesitation that many, many people experienced relationship issues very much like those I wrote of. There are male husbands and female wives who formally married and sought and found ways to balance home life and work life. Some are struggling to manage the care of children, some deal with in-laws, sex, money . . . all the things I had written about.

But just as often, people would approach me and ask why I didn't write about something other than the conventional cliché Norman Rockwell version of family. Here are some of the questions I fielded as I traveled the country:

"Why don't you write a book about families who don't fit the traditional mold?"

"Why don't you write about families that include a stepparent?"

"Do you think you'll ever write books for people who just live together?"

"How come when you write a book for happily married women, you assume they're married to men?"

“Can’t my husband and I be considered a family even though we don’t have any children?”

“I may be raising my children without a spouse, but don’t we still count as a family?”

The more I talked to people from all walks of life, the less certain I became about how to define a family. One thing that did become glaringly clear to me was that I could not write a book about happy families by focusing only on the typical and traditional Western version of family. To do so would be to turn a blind eye to the many, many variants of the unit called family today.

So, thought I, perhaps I could begin to define a family by first defining what it is not. Surely it is now obvious that family *cannot* be defined strictly as comprising one biological father, one biological mother, and 2.4 children all lovingly going to church in their Buick on a Sunday morning in spring.

There. That’s a start.

MOVE OVER, MRS. CLEAVER

Acknowledging that this stereotypical definition is no longer valid is, I suppose, an invitation for criticism. There is a concern in this country that the decline of the family institution embodied by the likes of Beaver, Wally, June, and Ward Cleaver is the direct result of our accepting attitude toward divorce, shared custody, cohabiting without a marriage license, single parenting, same-sex couples, and other new, “far-out” untraditional departures from old-fashioned conventions.

Certainly these changes in the family structure have caused societal, economic, and personal problems. But as our brief historical overview of the family has demonstrated, these types of big shifts have happened before, and a broader and more encompassing definition is simply another inevitable step for the ever-evolving family

unit. We could not have expected time to stand still or to embrace the Cleaver family model as the only legitimate family structure forever.

So, realizing that I want this book to be useful for individuals in all types of families, I had hoped that I was ready to move on to Chapter 2. But . . . not so fast.

How do I address you, the reader? If I talk about “you, your mate, and your children,” I stumble on the first and most challenging hurdle in this book. Why, you might ask, do I say “your mate” instead of “your spouse”? Do I assume that you are living with someone, rather than married? In fact, why do I mention a mate at all? Can’t families have just one adult? Moreover, you might also inquire why I write “your children”; many families have no children, and others claim their house cat or guard dog as bona fide family members. And another thing (since I’m on the topic), why do I assume that you are the head of household at all? Couldn’t I also have written “Your mom, your dad, and your siblings” to acknowledge the very real possibility that young adults may choose to read a book about creating a happy family?

My own online survey further added to the possibilities (and the confusion). When asking participants to choose a “family type,” I offered these eight options:

1. Spouse (opposite sex)
2. Unmarried companion (opposite sex)
3. Same-sex romantic companion or spouse
4. Biological child(ren) of current spouse/companion
5. Stepchild(ren)
6. Foster child(ren)
7. Parent(s) or other family members
8. Pets

I thought that should cover it, but just in case, I also offered the option of “Other” with the opportunity for explanation. When the results came in, it was clear that I had missed many possible family types. Take a deep breath and consider these “other” options offered by my respondents who said that their family consisted of themselves and these other individuals who live together in their home:

- “My son’s girlfriend and their daughter”
- “My fiancée of nine years”
- “My divorced husband who is living with me and my son”
- “My adult sister”
- “My sister, brother-in-law, and two nephews”
- “Adult biological children of former spouse”
- “My companion’s daughter”
- “My registered domestic partner”
- “My ex-same-sex partner and her granddaughter”
- “My second husband, his two children, and my two children”
- “My college roommate–girlfriend”
- “My daughter and her 23-year-old boyfriend”
- “My husband, my three children, my husband’s two children, and our eleven grandchildren, oops! almost forgot the dog”

Okay then! The American family certainly is an inclusive one. So which of the above is closest to who you are, dear reader?

THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY FAMILY

Stepparents and children, single-parent households, communal families, remarried parents, adoptive families, and the like are just beginning to redefine the twenty-first-century family. The future promises more changes as, for example, same-sex couples are offered the right to legal marriages, and lesbians choose to be impregnated through artificial insemination with donor sperm. Also, open adoptions now expand the family to include the presence of both the birth parents and the adoptive parents in the child's daily life. Even some sperm and egg donors and traditional surrogates are now taking active roles in the lives of their offspring, adding even more possibilities to that elusive definition of family.

The seemingly complicated family roots of an acquaintance of mine will not be entirely uncommon in the future. This couple has two children conceived through advanced artificial reproductive technology. In their case, the wife's eggs were mixed with donor eggs and fertilized with a mix of the husband's sperm and donor sperm. A resulting embryo was implanted in a traditional surrogate, who carried the child to term and handed him over to the intended parents, who may or may not be the biological parents. That's certainly a new definition of family. And it's totally legitimate. These folks are absolutely and totally a family!

WHAT KIND OF FAMILY ARE YOU?

If you'd like to categorize your family type, you might fit into one of these (or you might not!):

Nuclear family: parents and one or more biological children.

These parents may be married, may cohabit, or may be gay or lesbian.

Single-parent family: one parent and a child or children.

Extended family: a nuclear or single-parent family that lives with relatives outside the nuclear family, such as in-laws, grandparents, or adult siblings.

Blended family: a nuclear family in which one or both of the partners have children from a previous relationship; also a nuclear family that includes a foster child or adopted child in an open adoption.

Adoptive family: may be nuclear, single-parent, or blended. The child is not blood related to the parent, but has been adopted legally.

Foster family: can be nuclear, single-parent, or blended. One or more of the children are not birth or adopted children. The child may stay with the family for an extended period through an arrangement with special government agencies.

A.R.T. family: any family unit in which the children are the result of artificial reproductive technology involving the use of donor eggs or sperm, or a traditional surrogate.

Other family types: any group that does not consist of parent and children; for example, a newly married couple, same-sex couple, cohabiting couple.

In my research for this chapter, I've waded through what seemed like tons of information on the family, looking for that elusive descriptor that I feel can be applied to the diverse family landscape of the twenty-first century.

Coming up empty, I've decided to create my own definition. After much thought and reflection, I feel very comfortable defining family as "two or more people committed to sharing their life together who are related by blood, adoption, marriage or cohabitation, legal decree, or personal devotion."

That should cover it. Sure, some of the topics discussed in the following chapters will be of interest only to families headed by

married couples, or only to families with children, or only to families of same-sex couples, or . . . well you get the idea. But remarkably, what I have discovered by researching the wildly diverse and eclectic groups called the American family is that those things that make family members happy are usually universal and true regardless of how families define themselves. No matter what the diverse configuration or sexual, cultural, ethnic identity, the basic ingredients of happiness in the family are pretty much the same, as you'll see once we get down to it in Chapter 2.