

# FAMILIES ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE

## Chapter 1: Defining Family Across the Life Course

# Learning Objectives

1. Understand the importance of definitions of the family for making social, economic and research decisions.
2. Acknowledge that there is no one correct definition of the family.
3. Understand that research definitions of the family involve measurement.

(Continued)

# Learning Objectives (continued)

4. Learn that family definitions are contained within the larger context of kinship organization.
5. Comprehend that kinship organization supplies a “road map” of social relationships such as the “moral or right” way to select a mate and from whom one can expect inheritance.
6. Develop a “working” definition of the family

# Definitions

- Definitions are at the core of our knowledge
- All research begins with observation
- We must know what we are supposed to observe
  - Example: “couples”
- Danger of definitions being too narrow or too broad

(Continued)

# Definitions (continued)

- ▣ Definitions may carry social legitimacy and social status
  - Example: “parent” is a legitimate and normative status
- ▣ Definitions have an ideological component
  - Example: defining same sex couples as “families” is relatively new and some Canadians disagree
- ▣ Thus, definitions construct social legitimacy and tolerance

# The Changing Family

- The 2006 Census identifies several ways the family is changing:
  - Fewer married couple families (down to 68.6% from 70.5 in 2001)
  - Same sex couples are increasing at a faster rate than opposite sex couples (32.6% compared to 5.9%)
  - Single person households are increasing
  - More young adults 20-29 years of age live with their parents
  - For the first time in Canadian history, unmarried people out number the married

# What is a definition?

- From Aristotle's *Metaphysics* - a standard form of definition: genus and species
- Establish the meaning of a word by two components
  1. **Genus:** what other things share similar properties
  2. **Species:** how the thing we are defining differs from other things in the genus

(Continued)

# What is a definition ? (continued)

- Application: “Family”
  1. Genus: the family is a social group (such as work groups, peer groups, or friendship groups)
  2. Species: the family is the only form of social group whose membership is achieved through the sexual bond of same generation adults (marriage) and biological reproduction (offspring)

(Continued)

# What is a definition ? (continued)

- A second way of defining things is by “equivalence” of meaning (Hospers, 1967)
- All definitions consist of a term to be defined which is then followed by several words which do the defining
- Adequacy is tested by the ability of the phrase to replace the word in a sentence without damaging meaning

(Continued)

# What is a definition ? (continued)

- Application: “Family”
- Family - equivalent to “a social group containing sexually bonded adults and biological offspring”
- Example:
  - Bill, Sue and their children are a family
  - Bill, Sue and their children are “a social group containing sexually bonded adults and biological offspring”
- Example:
  - Bill, Tom and their children are a family
  - Bill, Tom and their children are “a social group containing sexually bonded adults and biological offspring”

# Restrictive definitions

- Definitions state what the function of a family should be
- Provide very specific definitions (e.g. “two opposite gender adults and their biological or adopted offspring”)
- Excluded groups include:
  - gay marriages and their children
  - single mother and single father families
  - children raised by their grandparents

# Definitions and Context

- Important contexts for the study of the “family”
  1. Legal definitions where the context is enforceable by legislated laws,
  2. Normative definitions where the context is the social norms in a society,
  3. Theoretical definitions where the context is the concepts and propositions of a social science theory, and
  4. Research definitions where the context is a specific research question

# Legal Definitions

- ▣ Legal definitions relating to family law are about custody, maintenance, common law relationships and cohabitation, not a definition of the family per se
- ▣ Each Province and Territory also has legislation about families

# Normative Definitions

- ▣ Shared by the majority of people in a country or region
- ▣ A practice or action regarded as socially legitimate and approved
- ▣ Sometimes legal definitions are out of synchrony with social norms
- ▣ Normative definitions of family have broadened

# Social Constructions

- ▣ Social constructions of the family gain power when adherents of a perspective increase in number
- ▣ This increase eventually changes normative definitions
  - Example: Social construction of “marriage” now includes gay and lesbian marriages

# Theoretical Definitions

- Use the concepts and propositions from a social science theory
- A concept is an abstract set of things or ideas collected under one idea
  - Example: “marriage” contains having “a publically recognized sexual bond between two people”

(Continued)

# Theoretical Definitions (continued)

- ▣ Definitions are the starting point for theory
- ▣ Propositions are the backbone of a theory defined by any statement that relates one concept to another
- ▣ Theoretical definitions are not 'correct/incorrect' only consistent with the concepts and propositions in a theory

# Research Definitions

- ▣ Derived from a theory, from a social problem, or from a hunch
- ▣ Common property is that they are linked to measurement
- ▣ Measurement is simply a way to assign numerals to a concept
- ▣ Research questions might also be generated from gaps in our empirical knowledge or data

# Conceptual Hypothesis

- ▣ Scientific methods are founded on logic and probability
- ▣ A question cannot be true or false; a proposition can
- ▣ Every research question leads to a conceptual hypothesis
- ▣ A conceptual hypothesis is a statement that can have a truth value (true or false)

# Conceptual and Measurement Hypotheses

Conceptual Hypothesis

**Marital conflict** is negatively related to **academic performance**.

Measurement Hypothesis

**Number of parental arguments per week**

**School grades**

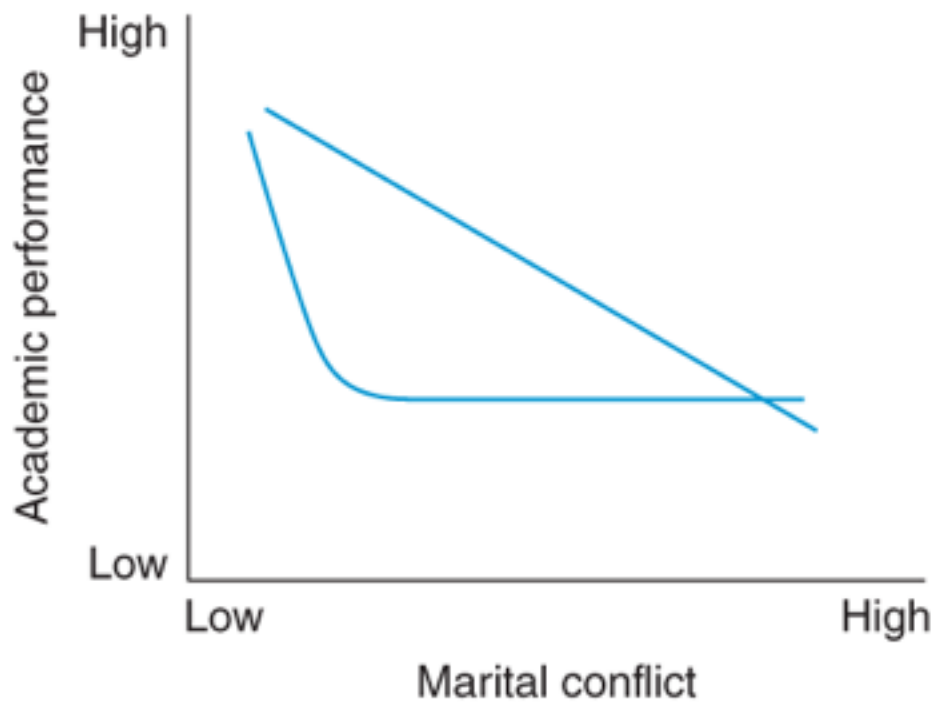
**Figure 1.1** Conceptual and Measurement Hypotheses

Copyright © 2013 Pearson Canada Inc.

# Testing the Conceptual Hypothesis

- ▣ Find reasonable and sound ways to measure the concepts (validity)
- ▣ Measures must be consistent (reliability)
- ▣ Develop a measure for the relation between two concepts
- ▣ Example: a negative relation or a positive relation; a straight line or a curve

# Two Patterns of Negative Relations



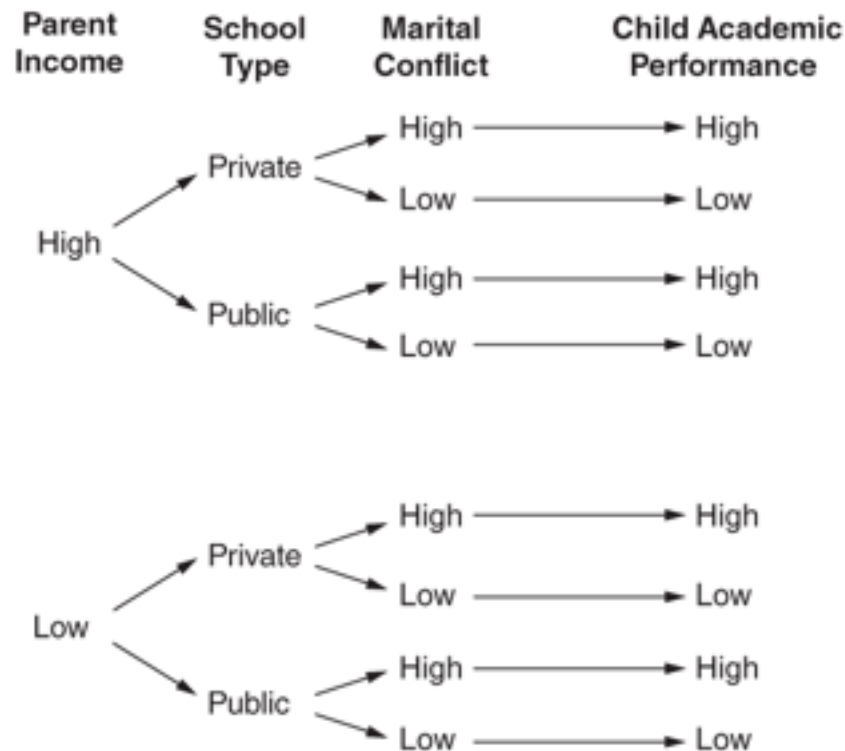
**Figure 1.2** Two Patterns of Negative Relations

Copyright © 2013 Pearson Canada Inc.

# Research Design

- ▣ Experiments are either impossible or unethical in social sciences
- ▣ Usually conduct surveys and observations
- ▣ Competing explanations must be accounted for in the design as best as possible

# Design for Three Independent Variable Effects on Child's Academic Performance



**Figure 1.3** Design for Three Independent Variable Effects on Child Academic Performance

Copyright © 2013 Pearson Canada Inc.

# Example: Child's Academic Performance

- Figure 1.3 shows a correlational design for our hypothesis
- Two control variables which we are hypothesizing having no effect on child's academic performance
- The only effect is for the level of marital conflict

(Continued)

# Example: Child's Academic Performance (continued)

- ▣ Findings in the social world are generally complex rather than simple
- ▣ Very likely to find that all of the independent variables in the design contribute to child's academic performance to various degrees
- ▣ Certain combinations of variables may also work together (interaction effect) to create an even stronger outcome

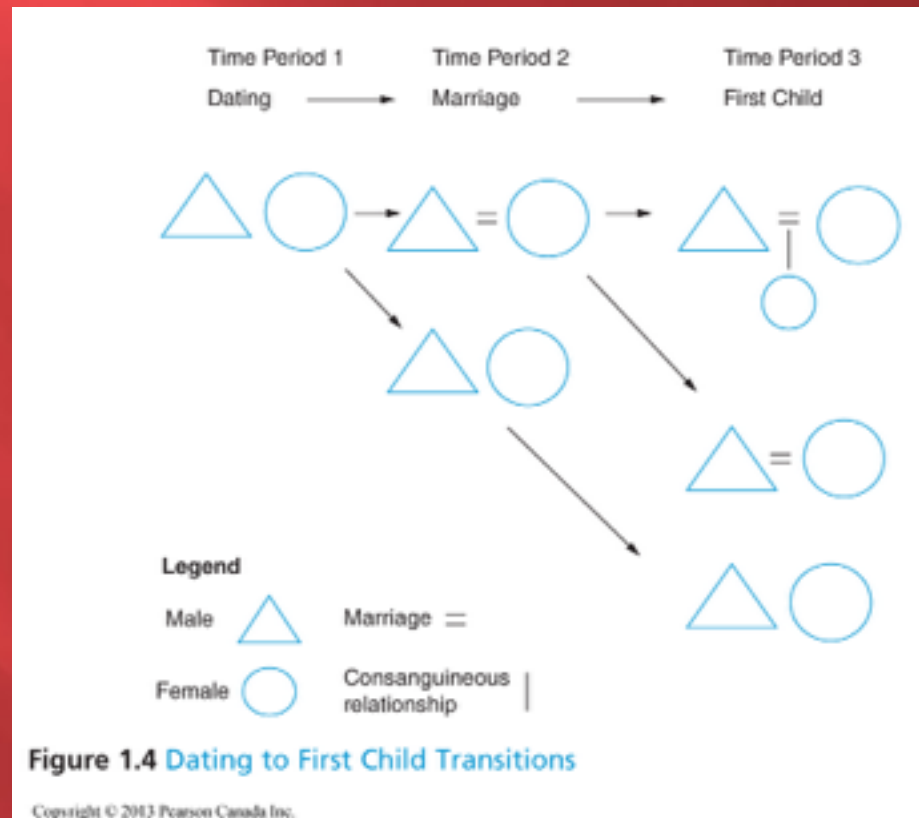
# Research Definitions

- ▣ Research definitions:
  - Must be clearly and precisely stated
  - Must be measurable
  - Must be operationalized (measured) so that the dependent variable is not used in the measure of any other variables included in the research (independent)

# Defining Families over the Life Course

- Families change and shift over the life course
- “A family is an intergenerational social group organized and governed by social norms regarding descent, and affinity, reproduction and the nurturant socialization of the young” (White 1991, p. 37)
- Intergenerational - the basic unit for a group to be a family is the adult-child relationship
- Goal for the family is the successful raising of children

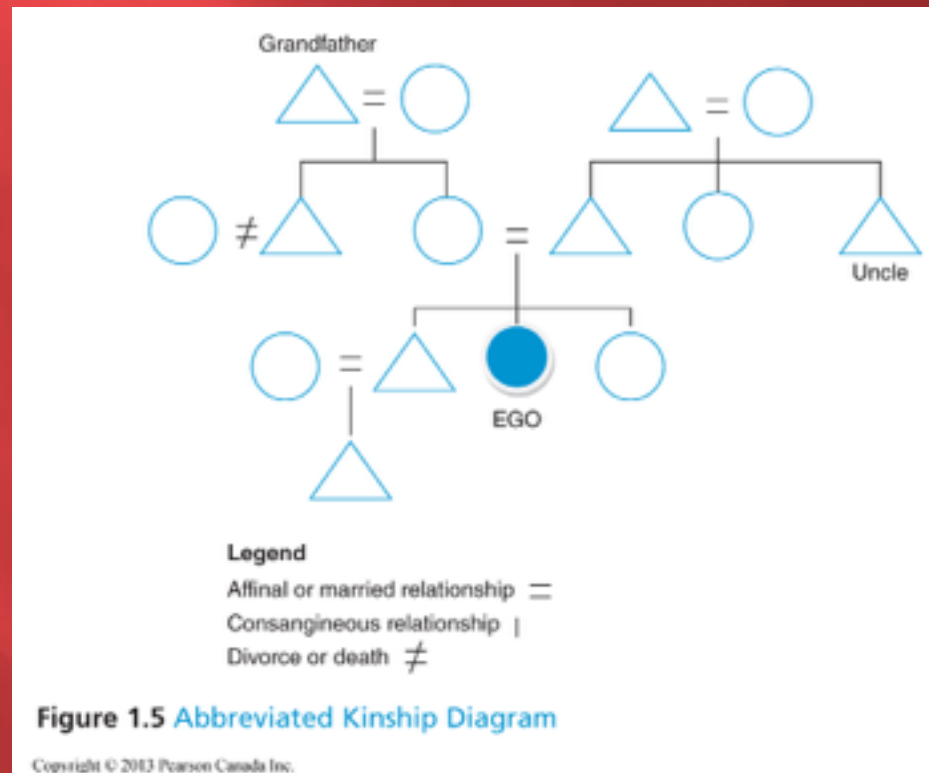
# Dating to First Child Transitions



# Historical Families and Kinship Systems

- Kinship systems represent basic assumptions about how we should behave (norms) and to whom we are related
- Kinship is dynamic in that it allows us to trace families over larger time frames such as centuries and even millennia
- Definitions in kinship systems:
  1. The family one is born into is called your **family of orientation**
  2. Family you form in adulthood is your **family of procreation**

# Abbreviated Kinship Diagram

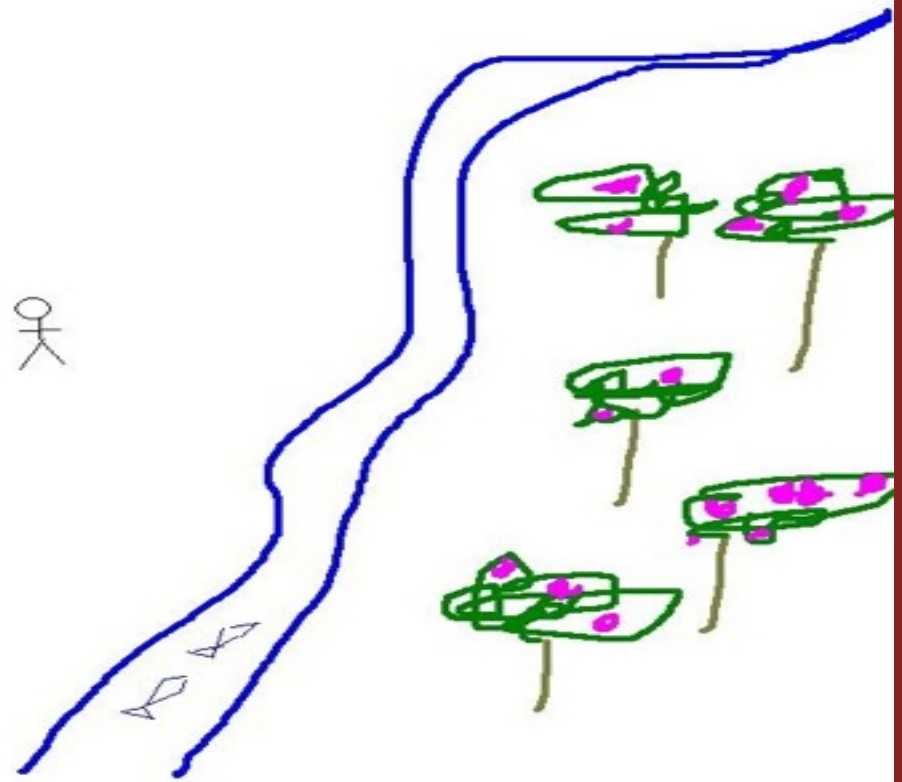
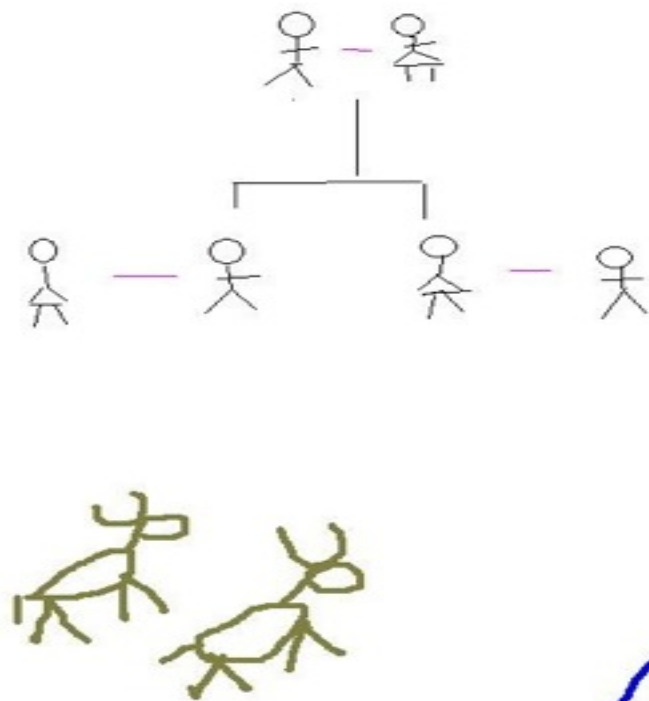


# Descent Lines

- **Unilineal descent** - reckon kin through one side of the family
- Two major forms: **matrilineal** and **patrilineal**
- **Bilateral systems** – reckon kin through both the mothers and fathers sides of the family

(Continued)

# Adam and Eve



# Descent Lines (continued)

- Original sources for social organization
- Organized marriage, social status, inheritance and property
- Structure of kinship maintained across successive generations by social norms:
  - Incest
  - Marriage (monogamy and polygamy),
  - Authority (patriarchal or matriarchal),
  - Residence (matrilocal, patrilocal or neolocal) and
  - Descent (matrilineal or patrilineal)
  - Adam and Eve

# Rules of Marriage

- ▣ Monogamy (only one mate)
- ▣ Polygamy (more than one mate)
  - Polyandry (multiple husbands)
    - ▣ Relatively rare
    - ▣ Tends to associated with poverty
  - Polygyny (multiple wives)
    - ▣ Most frequent form of polygamy

# Rules of Marriage Finance

- ▣ Bride price
  - The Teutonic “gifta”.
- ▣ Dowry
  - The case of India and Ireland – who gets the money?

# Rules of Descent

- ▣ Unilineal descent-

- ▣ Matrilineal
- ▣ Patrilineal
- ▣ Reckons descent through either the mother or father's side

- ▣ Multilineal descent

- ▣ Double descent reckons different type of power, property or prestige through each side.
- ▣ Bilateral reckons through both sides.

# Rules of Inheritance

- ▣ Most often follows rules of descent except there are often more specific rules such as:
- ▣ Primogeniture- first born
- ▣ Last born child- ultimogeniture
- ▣ Gender
- ▣ Choice of parent – such as in the Habitant family.

# Rules of Residence

- ▣ Neolocal
- ▣ Matrilocal
- ▣ Patrilocal
- ▣ Matri-patrilocal
- ▣ Avunculocal – most often groom's mother's brother

# Rules of Authority

- ▣ Patriarchal
- ▣ Matriarchal
- ▣ Rules of authority must be viewed in relation to other sources of power in family and marriage (e.g., wealth and status)

# Type of Extended Family

▣ Joint



▣ Stem



# Modernization Theory of Kinship & Descent (Convergence)

- ▣ Robert Winch, Goode and Parsons have all contributed to the traditional theory which argues:
- ▣ In hunter-gatherer societies small mobile family units were the most functional for hunting and following migrating herds.
- ▣ In domestic-pastoral societies there was still a need for some mobility.
- ▣ Different kinship systems react differently (eskimo)

# Modernization Theory cont.

- ▣ Horticultural and agricultural societies favored stable, immobile family units.
- ▣ Large families could supply labour for the family farm.
- ▣ Elderly could take care of young while mothers and fathers laboured.
- ▣ In industrial society, mobility becomes important again as people move to be near factories.
- ▣ Elderly and children become economic liabilities.
- ▣ Fertility declines as standards of child rearing become professionalized.

# History, Kinship and Dynamics

- ▣ The largest dynamic system for family is historical kinship while the smallest is the dyad ( parent-child, husband- wife, sibling, etc.).
- ▣ History has an affect on today's families in terms of kinship maps, moral judgements, and contracting marriage.
- ▣ Today, however, young couples are breaking new ground, such as cohabitation and single living, and these patterns are relatively unfamiliar to current scholars.

# Critical Thinking Questions

1. If you ask for a “family rate” at your local swimming pool or community center, what do you think is the defining property for being considered as a “family”?
2. Research questions use particular definitions to study aspects of families. What aspects would be the focus of a study of child welfare? Does it include adult children?
3. The dynamic nature of families means that our families are always changing. Is it possible to study or define something like family that is always changing?