Defining Family
Family: History of the Definition

- Before the 17th century in Europe: no term for people related by blood or marriage and sharing residence.
- Comes from the Latin word *familia* = household and *famulus* = servant.
- Family included the master of the household (*pater familias*), his servants, and his descendants.
- The wife of the *pater familias* could be either a part of her husband's family or part of her birth family (marriage *in manu* or *sine manu)*.
- In the late 17th century, “family” began to denote parents and their children.
- Only applied to units in European society.
Family Definitions in Anthropology

- Evolutionary approach (19th century)
- “Primitives” are sexually promiscuous → incapable of having families because children would not recognize their fathers
- Evolution from chaotic “female society” to orderly “male society”
Family Definitions in Anthropology

- Bronisław Malinowski (1884-1942), Polish anthropologist, declared family universal

- He distinguished issues of sexual activity from family and proved that Australian aborigines had marriage:
  - They had rules regulating sexual activity during sexual orgies
  - They differentiated between legal marriages and casual unions
  - Each child had a recognized father
Family Definitions in Anthropology

- Malinowski’s definition:
  - 1) a bounded set of people (a mother, a father, and children) who recognize each other and are distinguishable from other groups
  - 2) a definite physical space, a hearth and a home
  - 3) a particular set of emotions, family love

Later, anthropologists challenged Malinowski’s idea that family always includes fathers, but they kept other aspects of his definition → the basic unit is mother+child
Family Definitions in Anthropology

- Feminist anthropologists:
- True, it’s possible to find mother+child or couple+children units in every society, but not all such units exhibit Malinowski’s three features
- 1) Boundaries: Natives might not be interested in boundaries; no words to identify the unit of parents and children, e.g., Zinacantecos of southern Mexico
- 2) Place: Some families lack places – parents and children don’t eat and sleep together, e.g., Mundurucu of tropical South America
- 3) Love: People do not necessarily expect family members to love one another, e.g., Cheyenne Indians
Family Definitions in Anthropology

- Science is influenced by historical context
- Evolutionary approach emerged in the 19th century when a lot was changing → they understood that family is not unchanging, but interpreted those changes as “progress”
- But they were correct that modern Western family is something that only emerges in modern Western society
- Malinowski and many other anthropologists believed that family is universal – stems from a belief in the universal nurturant and reproductive role of women
- The family as we know is a cultural construct
- We need to listen to how people themselves view their relationships with others
Family Decline vs. Family Transformation

- Definition of the family plays a central role in this debate
- Family Decline: Structural and structural-functional definitions
- Family Transformation: Functional and postmodern definitions
Structural Definition

- Focuses on family structure
- Argues that family structure should be nuclear: a husband, a wife, and children
- Other family structures are not as good
- But Popenoe offers the following definition: “Domestic group consisting of at least one adult and one dependent”
Structural-Functional Definition

Functions of the Family:

- Work and production, economic cooperation
- Government
- Sexual regulation
- Regulation of procreation
- Childrearing and socialization of children – instilling values
- Education of children
- Source of emotional security – care, affection, companionship
Structural-Functional Definition

- Historically, there had been some structural loss (breakdown of extended family), and functions have been reduced.
- But the recent decline is different – “nuclear” family is breaking up.
- Nuclear family should perform two functions: childrearing and provision of affection and companionship.
- Loss of these functions = erosion of family’s importance as a social institution.
- This loss of functions is attributed to the changes in family structure.
Functional Definition

- Cowan: What matters is not family structure or number of functions, but how well those functions are performed.

- The families are changing rather than declining -- contemporary families perform functions of childrearing and provision of affection just as well as they were earlier.

- Whatever problems we see in childrearing are not due to family structure, but due to other processes in society (or at least causality is not established).

- We should not be concerned who performs the two functions, but how well they are performed, and how we can facilitate their performance.
Postmodern Definition

- Stacey: Family is an ideological, symbolic construct – family is changes over time and is subject to political processes
- We can never talk about family decline, only transformation – currently, family forms become more diverse and complex
- We should be concerned not with family decline but with problems in childrearing -- improve the lives of children rather than insist that they are raised within a specific family structure
- We need to support families’ functioning rather than try to restructure them
“A family consists of two or more people, one of whom is the householder, related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing in the same housing unit. A household consists of all people who occupy a housing unit regardless of relationship. A household may consist of a person living alone or multiple unrelated individuals or families living together”


“A family consists of a domestic group of people (or a number of domestic groups), typically affiliated by birth or marriage, or by analogous or comparable relationships — including domestic partnership, cohabitation, adoption, surname and (in some cases) ownership (as occurred in the Roman Empire).”
Contemporary Definitions: Employer Policies

“...an employee’s spouse and dependent, unmarried children under age 19 (age 23 or 25 if a full-time student and dependent upon the employee for support)” (Abbott, 2002)
Contemporary Definitions: Family Scholars

- “Ultimately, I define ‘family’ as the smallest, organized, durable network of kin and non-kin who interact daily, providing domestic needs of children and assuring their survival” (Stack, 1996)

- “We define family as any group of people related either biologically, emotionally, or legally. That is, the group of people that the patient defines as significant for his or her well-being” (McDaniel et al., 2005)

- “Family = Network of Mutual Commitment” (National Institute of Mental Health, 2005)
Your Definitions

- A group of people (related or unrelated) who are dependent on one another, support each other, and love each other unconditionally.
- A group of people who share a bond and are connected through a web of experiences, values, emotions, and a fostered culture. This unit does not necessarily have to be tied together biologically, but instead through their common socializations.
- A fluid group of people, tied together by more than common necessity or the desire to achieve a specific goal, who create a support system of unconditional love for one another.
- A group of people who are economically and socially dependent on one another, influence each others’ ideas and values, and depend on one another for unconditional love and support.
- Family consists of a framework of people that provide love and support, either biological or not.
- A constantly changing group of individuals brought together by blood or connection, who affect one another on a personal level.
Defining Family

- No single “objective” definition
- The family is an ideal and a contested terrain
- Typical definitions are based on:
  - Law
  - Biology
  - Nurturance
Two or more persons related by blood, marriage, common-law marriage, or adoption
Biology

- Very specific kind of biological definition: “blood” = genetic ties
- It originates from a patrilineal system (the lineage is determined through the father), that emphasized male seed
- That definition was extended – both women and men provide “seeds” – but still, we focus on genetic ties; children are “half hers, half his”
- This is different from a matrilineal system – values motherhood per se, i.e., the experience of pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, etc.
- In our system, women’s rights to the child are not their rights as mothers, but as “father equivalents”
- This contradiction is most evident in cases of surrogate mothering – e.g., Baby M case
Genetic Ties vs Social Relationships

- The closest genetic tie a human being can have – identical twin
- Next closest -- ties between parents and children and between full siblings. Sister=mother in terms of genes.
- Half-siblings have the same connection as grandparents and grandchildren – 25% connection, cousins – 12.5%
- But parenthood is not just a genetic tie -- social relationship matters
- Parent-child relationship is invested with social and legal rights that are not recognized in our society in any other genetic relationship
Many Americans today define family by love and nurturance.
Love and Nurturance

- This is a recent development – nurturance came to the center of this definition in the 20th century.
- Corresponds to Public (Market) vs Private (Family) division.
- But why do we assume that people get nurtured in the family? Some families are nurturant, some are not (abuse, neglect).
- Still, we try to map nurturance to specific kinds of ties (blood, marriage, or adoption) and ignore other nurturance and love as non-family.
Do we have a choice of family?

- Even though we view family as private business, it is not – it is very much public.
- We have a choice (AGENCY) but that choice is constrained by social forces (STRUCTURE) as well as cultural norms (CULTURE).
Why define family?

- Policies and legal cases:
  - Housing benefits
  - Health insurance benefits
  - U.S. immigration system
  - Custody cases, e.g., Alison D. v. Virginia M.

- Formal legal definition of a family (blood, marriage or adoption) collides with a functional definition of the family (based on nurturance and love)

- Moral debate: debate about family values – family definition is in the center