

Family: Basic Concepts

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the sociological concept of the family, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Family
 - a. Nuclear Family
 - b. Extended Family and Kinship

1. FAMILY

The way in which sociologists think, conceptualize, and theorize the **family** is not the same as the way in which you typically think of your family. You might think of your family as something natural, established and clear-cut, meaning ‘This person is in my family, and this person is not in my family.’

However, sociologists don’t necessarily view the family in this way. They view the family as a product of society--the family, and decisions about who's in it and who's not, are essentially a social construction.

Societies at this point in time and throughout history have had different ways of determining familial social relationships, like tracing descent, genealogy, kinship, etc., and they're not always the same. The family itself is a cultural universal, meaning the family unit is found in some form in every culture and in every society, but membership, definitions, and delineation of the family is not the same in each society. The family is structured through social interaction--it is a social construction.

The family is a group of two or more people who cooperate economically and are related by blood, marriage, or adoption.



THINK ABOUT IT

Think of your family. Who's in it? Who's not considered a part of your family? Why not? These are likely easy questions for you to answer, but how you define family and delineate the boundaries of your family might not be the same way that someone in Malawi, a country in Africa, defines family. There are cultural and social elements to how people define family.

The family as a social construction means that it's a product of the particular society and the needs of that society that you're living in. In the United States, families are often distinguished two ways:

- Nuclear family

- Extended family

You are likely familiar with these terms, because notions of how the family works are simply taken for granted.



TERM TO KNOW

Family

A group of two or more people who cooperate economically and are related by blood, marriage, or affiliation.

1a. Nuclear Family

The **nuclear family** consists of two people and their children, and is often defined by marriage. You know what **marriage** is, but technically speaking, it is defined as a legal union involving economic cooperation, sexual activity, and often, but not always, childbearing.



TERMS TO KNOW

Nuclear Family

Limiting the scope of family to two adults and their children.

Marriage

A legal union usually involving economic cooperation, sexual activity, and (sometimes) childbearing.

1b. Extended Family and Kinship

The **extended family** is the nuclear family plus relatives like aunts, uncles, and cousins. In a sense, though, your family is not natural. It's one way to organize relationships in society and to form that basic societal institution, the family unit, but there's nothing truly natural about it, because it potentially could be structured another way.

A similar idea, kinship, is helpful for making sense of how social relationships make up a family. **Kinship** is a culturally patterned social relationship based on common ancestry, marriage, or adoption.



THINK ABOUT IT

Who are your ancestors? How do you trace your descent? Where do you come from? These answers are not natural, just like the delineation of your family isn't natural. People construct their ideas of family.

IN CONTEXT

Anthropologists looking at other societies with a comparative lens have provided insights into the social construction of people's relationships of common ancestry and kinship. They have identified seven different systems of kinship that are all distinct from each other. For instance, in American society, people draw a kinship relationship with their father's brother, and call him 'uncle.'

However, in a different kinship system that anthropologists call the Iroquois system of kinship, your father's brother is not labeled as an uncle. They don't have the same uncle relationship that Americans do. In the Iroquois system, your father's brother is labeled more strongly, and is also

looked upon as a parent. There's no distinction made for uncle, for your father's brother.

Also in the Iroquois system of kinship, your father's sister is called an aunt, but your mother's sister is called a parent. As you can see, the sex is the same. Your mother's brother, on the other hand, as a different sex, is uncle. As you can see, it's more complicated than the American system of kinship, and it defines the family differently. These different definitions of family illustrate how kinship and family are social constructions, which is the lens that sociologists bring to studying these topics.



TERM TO KNOW

Extended Family

A family composed of your nuclear family plus extended relatives such as grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles.

Kinship

A culturally patterned social relationship based on common ancestry, marriage, or adoption.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about a sociological introduction to the concept of the **family**, including the **nuclear and extended family**, as well as **kinship**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



TERMS TO KNOW

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Kinship

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A legal union usually involving economic cooperation, sexual activity, and (sometimes) childbearing.

Nuclear Family

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