Alan Wright, left, and Joel Player celebrate becoming Australia’s first same-sex married couple, at 12.01 a.m. on 7 December 2013 in Canberra.

In December 2013, for about five days, same-sex marriage was legal in the Australian Capital Territory. The ACT government had passed legislation to enable same-sex couples to marry despite the fact that this contravenes the federal *Marriage Act*. After the ACT Labor Government’s defiant ruling, the federal Abbott Liberal Government immediately launched a challenge to the capital territory legislation in the High Court. Federal Attorney-General George Brandis urged the ACT government to refrain from allowing couples to marry until the result of this High Court challenge was known. The ACT government refused, and at least 27 couples ‘tied the knot’ before the High Court ruling overturned the territory law. According to the *Canberra Times*, many of the couples who had married in the window of opportunity left the courtroom vowing ‘it’s not over’ (Inman, Cox & Peake 2013).

The political struggle over marriage rights is one of many we could have drawn on to emphasise how relationships are controversial and contested. In Australia and most parts of the Western world, the relationships we tend to think of as our most private and personal are subject to considerable public debate and legal contestation. Controversies about families and relationships tend to arise as a consequence of the following demographic changes:

- Age of first marriage has risen over the past three decades, with many people having a number of sexual relationships and/or living with their partners before they get married.
• Fewer people are getting married in the first place and many marriages are no longer for life.
• A third of children are born outside of marriage, in cohabiting or single parent households.
• More than a third of all marriages will end in divorce, meaning many children now experience their parents’ separation.
• Some children will have sole parents or only one active parent, or will grow up in a step or blended family.
• Further to this, there is greater social awareness of same-sex relationships, and increasing numbers of lesbians and gay men are having children.

For socially and morally conservative members of society these social trends represent a decline. It is taken for granted in this view that marriage should be confined to a couple comprised of a man and a woman. Along with this stance, it is often stated that the ‘intact’ (that is, not divorced) nuclear family comprised of mother, father and children who all live together is the only legitimate site for raising children and sustaining adult sexual relationships. However, for less socially conservative members of society, contemporary relationships are perceived as more complex than our conventional definitions and laws can accommodate. The family is regarded as a more flexible entity and can be more broadly defined to keep up with the changes occurring in how people live their lives. In this view, definitions, laws and policies should move along with the times, and new conventions and moralities will necessarily come to the fore to support the adults and children living new configurations of family life.

Alongside controversies in the public domain about changing relationship patterns, families and relationships are often contradictory for those who live them. On the one hand they are about our most profound, joyful and important social connections. They are the privileged setting for expressions of social connectedness and love. On the other, they are also about power, exploitation and violence. As Bittman and Pixley (1999) argue, for the people who participate in them, families have a ‘double life’. Changing relationships offer women, children and men potentially more freedom than they had in the past, but at the same time they offer new challenges and constraints.

The controversies and contradictions inherent in contemporary families and relationships make them an enthralling topic to study. This book seeks to do justice to the complexity of this topic from a sociological perspective.

DEFINING FAMILIES AND RELATIONSHIPS

The chapters of this book look at a range of contemporary themes of relevance to families and relationships. Here we begin to map the parameters of these two concepts in current sociological thought, as a preliminary to discussing them in greater depth throughout the book.
Relationships

At their most basic, the relationships we discuss in this book are connections between people, but not just any connections. In the first instance, a relationship can be an objective connection based on biological relatedness (‘blood’) or marriage. In Western and some non-Western cultures, biological and legal ties between people are objectively acknowledged as relationships, whether or not the people concerned ever see each other or have any feelings towards each other. Although husbands and wives, or biological brothers and sisters, usually do have an emotional connection, the point is they have a relationship in the eyes of law or cultural convention whether or not a social or emotional connection also exists.

Brynin and Ermisch (2009) define relationships as ongoing interactions between people, in the sense that there must be some degree of commitment to the exchange that distinguishes it from the kind we have with a stranger. These interactions can be of varying degrees of emotional significance and intensity. Spencer and Pahl (2006), for instance, speak of the ‘personal communities’ each individual has, which are made up of people who can be characterised as ‘associates’ and ‘useful contacts’, through to ‘confidantes’ or ‘soul mates’ who are privy to our innermost thoughts and feelings. Each individual’s personal community of relationships is likely to be made up of acquaintances, friends and family members.

Relationships can also be thought of as intimate interactions with other people, defined by their qualities rather than any kind of objective status. Jacqui Gabb (2009) observes that intimacy has often been discussed in the context of sexual relationships, but it is equally relevant to ‘affective interactions’ or emotional closeness between friends or parents and children. For Lynn Jamieson (1999), intimacy may include caring, sharing, physical closeness, love, ‘deep’ understanding, and privileged knowledge. For instance, friendship is a type of relationship determined largely on the basis of its qualities. People become our friends because we choose them or they choose us, rather than for objectively determined reasons such as blood or marriage. Sometimes intimate relationships also involve a sexual component. So we can speak of girlfriends, boyfriends, lovers, or ‘friends with benefits’ as other examples of relationships we enter by choice that have no objectively defined status, where there is sexual and/or emotional closeness involved. In the era of social media, intimate relationships are not necessarily face to face. They may be expressed through interactions on social networking sites such as Facebook, or involve a combination of online and offline interactions.

In this book we are concerned with both relationships that have objective status as blood or marriage ties, and those that are more subjective in the sense that they exist by virtue of emotional and sexual connections or interactions. It is important to give due attention to both kinds of relationships because many people today consider their most significant relationships of love and care are not those determined by conventional ties of blood or marriage.
Families, Relationships and intimate life

In keeping with a sociological perspective on family life, there are at least three main ways in which family can be conceptualised: as a specific set of people, in keeping with the objective definitions used by government organisations; as a social institution, or subsystem of social life with an identifiable structure; and in more subjective terms, as a set of personal meanings or ideas about what constitutes family. It is worth exploring these in some detail. While there is a good deal of fit between the first and second ways of thinking about family, with regard to the relationships that are included and excluded, the third way of thinking about family may considerably contradict the first two more ‘common-sense’ understandings.

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Family as an objectively defined set of people

In the legal and policy arena, relational terms such as ‘father’, ‘mother’, ‘parent’, ‘child’, ‘aunt’ ‘grandmother’ ‘husband’, ‘wife’ and so on designate people who are connected by blood, marriage (more recently de facto marriage or cohabitation) or adoption, who by virtue of these objectively defined relationships are assumed to have certain obligations and entitlements. Objective definitions of family inform collections of official statistics such as the Australian Census. They also inform a range of government laws and policies. For instance, if you are legally defined as a mother or a father, you have certain financial and social obligations to support the people legally defined as your children, if they are less than 18 years of age. If you are legally defined as a deceased person’s aunt, and you are their only surviving relative by blood or marriage, you may be entitled to make a claim to inherit their wealth. If you are married to or cohabiting with your partner who becomes unemployed, and you are working, your relationship status legally determines the government benefits to which your partner is entitled.

Although these official definitions of family greatly influence how social obligations and entitlements are determined by law in any given society, and are based on dominant cultural norms about family relationships, they tell us nothing about the meaning or function of the relationships. In other words, assumptions are made about the social support content of relationships, based on biological relatedness, or marriage, or co-residence, or a combination of these different elements. This means the definitions, and associated obligations or entitlements, are very powerful. Yet they often lag behind observable social change. For example, until the late 1980s, de facto heterosexual couples were counted in the Australian Census as unrelated adults living in a house together. Until the late 1990s, same-sex couples counted as unrelated adults. Until 2010, children born to lesbian couples could only have the birth mother’s name on their birth certificates. The relationships that law and policy-makers take to be family relationships may not be keeping up with what is actually happening in people’s lives. The lag between official, objective definitions of family and social reality can create distress and difficulties for those living in less conventional relationships of mutual support and care. As sociologists,
we need to be mindful of these objective definitions because they are relevant to the
distribution of social and economic resources, and thus greatly influence people’s lives.

**Family as a social institution**

A fairly rigid view of family was taken by sociologists working in the post-World War II era such as Talcott Parsons and George Murdock, who were keen to determine what role families served in industrialised Western societies. Murdock defined a family as ‘a social group characterized by common residence, economic co-operation and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship and one or more children, own or adopted of the sexually co-habiting adults’ (Murdock 1949 cited in Morgan 1985, p. 20).

In this view of family, which largely conforms to the two-parent nuclear family household, the family is a basic ‘unit’ or building block of society, in the sense that it has four fixed main purposes or functions that ensure the social survival and well-being of its members: namely, common residence or setting up a **household**; financial support or cooperation; reproduction of children and sexuality. We discuss the functionalist perspective on families more in Chapter 4. At this point it is sufficient to say that although this definition conforms to what many people think a family is and does, there have been many criticisms of Murdock’s and other functionalist definitions of family.

One of the major flaws in the definition is that it is so fixed and thus unable to accommodate how assumptions and practices among people who consider themselves family members have changed in a relatively short period of time. Consider these contemporary examples that problematise Murdock’s definition:

- Throughout the Western world, there are growing numbers of married or cohabiting couples who remain child-free through choice or infertility. Does this mean these couples are not each other’s family members?
- Family members may not co-reside (e.g. one partner may need to live interstate for work purposes or be posted overseas in the armed services).
- Common residence may not equate with family relationships (e.g. prisons, boarding schools, shared student households).
- Sexuality is not always reproductive or socially approved (heterosexual couples practise contraception, same-sex relationships are still stigmatised) and **monogamy** (having sex exclusively with one person) is not always practised among couples who live together (gay male couples often negotiate ‘non-monogamy’ in their relationships).
- People who live together in a sexual relationship may value their economic independence from each other. For instance, many cohabiting heterosexual couples and gay couples do not pool money and may own property independently of each other.

Despite extensive critiques of the functionalist definition of family, some sociologists maintain it is still important to think of the family as an influential unit and social institution, in order to focus attention on how it continues to be a ‘privileged relational form at a macro-level of policy, law and politics’ (Edwards, Ribbens McCarthy & Gillies 2012, p. 732). The movement for marriage equality and other forms of recognition
for same-sex relationships indicates that many seek to expand the definition of what constitutes a legitimate family relationship rather than dispense with the category ‘family’ entirely. Michael Gilding (2010) observes that many decisions made in the area of intimate life remain deeply patterned and governed by convention rather than subject to choice, and for this reason believes ‘family’ still has relevance as an analytic category. For instance, most people leave their money to their children and most wives continue to take their husband’s name, despite the fact that there is the choice and the opportunity to do otherwise.

**Family as a subjective category**

Throughout the 1990s, changing social trends such as those listed above indicated considerable challenges were occurring to the nuclear family household. Retaining family as a concept, while moving away from the notion that it performs fixed social functions, or is a specific set of objectively determined blood or marriage relationships, characterises much contemporary family sociology, particularly work informed by micro-sociological perspectives that seeks to understand people’s relationships from their own point of view. In this way of thinking, family relationships are conceptualised and ordered in different ways according to different criteria at different times. In other words, family signifies ‘the subjective meaning of intimate connections rather than formal, objective blood or marriage ties’ (Silva & Smart 1999, p. 7).

One illustration of this point is that ‘family’ as a concept has enormous appeal among gay men and lesbians as a descriptive term for their most valued social relationships, despite the fact that same-sex relationships do not have full legal recognition in most parts of the world and remain socially stigmatised. For instance, the partners of lesbian and gay biological mothers and fathers may have limited legal status as family members even if they are actively involved in parenting, but they may still call themselves mothers and fathers to reflect their social status in children’s lives. Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001) also argue that lesbians and gay men’s most significant relationships may be with friends who come to perform many of the social functions conventionally associated with family members, and are referred to as like brothers, or sisters, rather than as friends. Using the language associated with family relationships stakes a claim to social and legal recognition of important and meaningful relationships that fall outside convention.

In accepting a shift away from objective definitions of family, it is important not to lose sight of a manageable focus. As Gubrium and Holstein (1990, p. 155) point out: ‘The familial is not … an undisciplined, unfettered interpretive brainstorm’. By this they mean that there are limits to the kinds of relationships and phenomena the concept ‘family’ can describe. According to Ribbens McCarthy (2012) the category ‘family’ continues to evoke a sense of togetherness and belonging for many people, in the sense that it conveys a ‘unit’ they can be part of, no matter what form that unit takes. In conventional and unconventional usage, family continues to bring to mind associated terms such as ‘household’, ‘home’, ‘privacy’, ‘intimacy’, ‘connectedness’. It continues to evoke meaningful, enduring and emotionally significant relationships.
From ‘family’ to ‘personal’ or ‘intimate’ life

For a number of years now there has been a debate within sociology about just how useful the concept family really is in capturing the complex, lived experience of contemporary domestic and relational lives. In concluding this discussion of ‘family’ it is important to point out that although many sociologists argue for the continuing relevance of the concept, others ask whether the term is flexible enough to describe the kinds of relationships and personal interactions contemporary people value, and evoke the kind of research needed in order to explore these.

Sociologists such as Michael Gilding (2010) in Australia, and Rosalind Edwards, Jane Ribbens McCarthy and Val Gillies (2012) in the UK, argue for the continuing importance of the concept family precisely because they believe the family remains an institutionally embedded social form that is in many ways resistant to social change. Gilding warns that in moving away from the concept family we risk making too much of the ‘open-endedness’ of close relationships at the expense of drawing attention to ‘their institutionalisation’ (2010, p. 757). Gilding argues that many aspects of family life continue to be subject to conventions that are deeply embedded rather than flexible, negotiated or subjectively reconfigured, and the concept ‘family’ best draws attention to this structural rigidity.

By contrast, other recent scholarship is informed instead by the concept ‘personal life’ in order to better capture the fluidity and variety of contemporary relational lives without the historical baggage that may accompany the concept family (Roseneil & Budgeon 2004; Smart 2007). Carol Smart, for instance, proposes it is time to develop a wider conceptualisation of the field than ‘family’ allows. For Smart, ‘personal life’ encompasses ‘all sorts of families, all sorts of relationships and intimacies, diverse sexualities, friendships and acquaintanceships’ (2007, p. 188). Rather than conjuring up an image of the family as a relatively fixed ‘institution’ or ‘unit’, Smart encourages us to think of personal lives through the metaphor of knitting or weaving or ‘woven webs of relationships’ (2007, p. 188). There will be many opportunities to reflect on the relative merits of ‘family’ as opposed to ‘personal life’ as you read your way through this book.

We call our book *Families, Relationships and Intimate Life* because the term ‘intimate life’, for us, better captures a sense of the social contexts and interconnections relevant to how individuals live their lives, than a notion of the ‘personal’. It allows us to discuss relational lives in a broad sense; we include subjective definitions of families and the wide variety of relationships involving love, care, belonging and/or sexual intimacy. Intimate life allows us to explore diverse relationships in different households and across different life stages.

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

Fundamentally, sociologists think of change in families and relationships as to some degree inevitable. This is because change in families, relationships and intimate lives cannot be separated out from social change more broadly. Three basic assumptions that guide this book are as follows: that social forces shape the decisions in our lives that
Families, Relationships and intimate life seem most natural, personal or private; that the social forces of late modernity made possible by global capitalism are an important influence on contemporary relationships, and that more localised ethnic, religious, historical traditions and practices also continue to influence the way we think, feel and act out our relationships. Below we discuss each of these assumptions in turn.

1 Social forces shape our personal decisions

It is challenging to think of personal life being shaped by social forces. Our relationships often feel so taken for granted, natural and individual that it is difficult to examine them with an analytical or critical lens—but without this we are unable to fully understand the present, the past and the future family configurations. As we will explore in this book, families and family practices such as naming children illustrate continuities with the past. Although we may seek to make different decisions from our parents’ generation we find ourselves reproducing some of their social values and ideas. Yet relationships and families are also historically specific. The shape, structure, functions and experiences they offer have changed and will continue to change over time. Social categories such as gender and social class have become less deterministic and more fluid in the last half century but, as we will explore in the chapters that follow, both gender and class continue to shape our relationships and choices in profound ways. A further key insight is that the changing nature of global capitalism has an enormous influence on the way we live our intimate and family lives. This brings us to our second assumption.

2 Globalisation and associated processes of individualisation influence families and personal lives

Most sociologists broadly agree we are living through a period of immense economic and societal transformation, largely accelerated by the now global dominance of free-market capitalism. Since the late 1970s and 1980s we have witnessed far-reaching changes such as the demise of many national communist and socialist governments, and the greater reach of neo-liberal economics. The influence of this can be felt most keenly in the world of work, where secure employment conditions and the notion of a job for life have given way to the ‘downsizing’ or demise of many traditional industries and the casualisation of the workforce. Along with the deregulation of national economies, consumerism has further encroached into private life, as credit has become more freely available in Western countries. As Pamela Kinnear (2002) explains, these kinds of economic changes force people to become increasingly self-reliant and take individual responsibility for their own circumstances. The precariousness of work and the tendency of neo-liberal economics to emphasise a minimal welfare state fosters a way of thinking about and acting in the world, in which ‘the politics of the individual prevail over the politics of the collective’ (p. 22). What this means is people are increasingly fending for themselves and being required to draw on their own resources when it comes to their personal lives.

Many contemporary sociologists emphasise that this contemporary focus on the individual is the continuation of processes that began to become evident in industrialised
societies much earlier in the twentieth century. Broadly, we can refer to these processes as **individualisation**. For instance, English sociologist Anthony Giddens (1992) argues that an emphasis on personal growth and self-identity is what distinguishes the contemporary historical era from previous times. The spread of democracy and the rapid pace of social change in industrialised societies have, to some degree, undermined the authority and predictability of social categories such as gender, class, religion or status group. Decisions ranging from who to love, how to express that love, whether to marry, stay single or have children, are more and more taken at the level of the individual rather than following taken-for-granted expectations of family or community.

Although personal lives have become more individualised under global capitalism, **globalisation** has also fostered new and hitherto inconceivable forms of social connectedness. Increasingly affordable technologies that make the world feel much smaller such as cut-price air travel, internet, mobile phones, Skype and satellite TV also influence the way we practise and experience family and intimate relationships. For instance, many infertile and gay prospective parents now travel overseas to create families through commercial surrogacy (Dempsey 2013a, 2014). By means of globalised communication technologies, parents and children maintain day-to-day relationships of care across national borders in a new social phenomenon, ‘transnational caregiving’ (Baldassar, Baldock & Wilding 2007). Emotionally committed couples are able to sustain their love and sexual relationships as ‘distant love’ while living and working in different countries (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2014) or ‘living apart together’ (Levin 2004).

### 3 Local cultures and traditions maintain influence over personal relationships

Our third sociological assumption is that despite individualisation and globalisation, relationships and families need to be viewed in their local social and historical context. We must attend to factors such as **ethnicity**, religion, the migration experience and local historical factors. It is important to maintain a comparative perspective that illuminates the local contexts and settings in which families and relationships are conceived and practised. Despite broader social changes, high levels of family obligation and support continue to thrive in some communities. We compare practices customary to some South, South-East and East Asian families such as arranged marriage, the obedience to and respect of one’s parents and ancestors, and the formation of multi-generational households with increasingly smaller Anglo-Australian families and their fragmented family ties.

**WHY STUDY FAMILIES AND RELATIONSHIPS?**

A thorough exploration of the controversies, contradictions and broad patterns that characterise contemporary relationships and families is crucial for a variety of reasons. This knowledge is central for designing sound economic and social policy. It enables us to predict, monitor and comprehend population change; particularly fertility patterns, the
age structure of our society and family instability and the consequences for family care of the dependent—babies and children, the sick and disabled and the aged.

We hope the thinking you will do as you read this book will be useful to you in two major ways. You may develop a career in policy-making or service delivery in the health and community services, and we aim to foster your ability to think broadly about the issues you will encounter in these environments. For instance, how do various social divisions such as gender, socio-economic status and the migration/refugee experience shape a person’s behaviour and opportunities? Sound knowledge of the social forces underpinning beliefs and practices about families and relationships is important in designing effective social policy with social justice outcomes.

Second, this book will provide you with a broader understanding of the social forces influencing your own families, relationships and intimate life: with regard to the choices you and your friends and family members are making and the constraints on choice. It may help you to make sense of questions like:

• Why can’t I find a partner?
• Can I commit to a long-term relationship?
• Why can’t I get my partner to do their fair share of domestic labour?
• How should the government best support me in balancing and maintaining work, family, and relationships of love and care to significant others?
• Why does my friend stay with her abusive partner?

It may be a consolation to learn through reading this book that despite our personal views we are all in it together in navigating the complexity of contemporary families and relationships. As the debate over gay marriage indicates, we live in interesting times and face distinctive opportunities and challenges conducting our relational lives under current social conditions.

**STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK**

The first four chapters provide the conceptual scaffolding necessary to analyse contemporary relationships and families. In Chapter 2, we examine families in their historical context. We concentrate primarily on the development of families in the UK, the USA and Australia. We trace the ways in which relationships and families have changed alongside economic development from pre-modern traditional families to modern nuclear families and then to our current environment of late-modern families (sometimes termed post-modern families). As a comparative contrast we will examine the history of Indigenous Australian families and also Chinese families, which provides a background for comparisons with South-East Asia running through the book.

In Chapter 3 we examine cultural differences in relationships and families. The cultural differences we explore are based on ethnic differences, class differences and differences according to sexuality. We begin by discussing the key elements of the organisation of relationships in Western, industrialised countries with a focus on the organisation of gender and sexuality. We also briefly discuss the distinct elements of Aboriginal families.
followed by a section on variations between immigrant families in Australia. We then trace the ways in which social inequality continues to shape family experiences and end with a section on same-sex-attracted and gender-diverse families and relationships. In Chapter 4 we lay out the major sociological perspectives used to analyse families. We explain how these theories developed in concert with historical change and identify which theories are currently ‘live’ in contemporary scholarship.

Following this groundwork we then move to more substantive chapters organised loosely around traditional dominant heterosexual life-stage transitions—dating, marriage, parenting and labour. Due to the processes of individualisation discussed earlier, a fixed and linear notion of life stages is hard to sustain and we offer a taste of the contemporary complexities characteristic of youth, middle-age and old age as we move through the text.

In Chapter 5 we examine young people, relationships and sexuality in the context of what is sometimes known as ‘new adulthood’. In Chapter 6 we explore love, commitment and the implications and significance of cohabitation and contemporary marriage for heterosexuals and same-sex partners. In Chapter 7 we consider how personal lives can be lived beyond notions of family or the couple-based household. Chapter 8 provides an opportunity to think through the implications of changing fertility patterns and the social implications of assisted reproductive technologies (ART) such as donor insemination, IVF and surrogacy.

The changing nature of parenthood and childhood is traced in Chapter 9, along with discussion of childcare debates, which are particularly fraught in the Australian context. Chapter 10 critically examines how far feminism has come in changing domestic labour arrangements and the potential for anyone to achieve work–family balance in rapidly deregulating paid labour markets. The implications of the normalisation of divorce are traced in Chapter 11. In Chapter 12 we discuss the exploitation and violence that still (all too often) characterises family life. Chapter 13 discusses ageing and family ties across generations and geographic locations. We conclude the book with an assessment of the present relational landscape and consider the potential for free, fair and satisfying intimate relationships in the future. We ponder how we are faring with developing the new moral frameworks that some sociologists emphasise are needed for these changing times.

KEY CONCEPTS

- Same-sex attracted and gender diverse
- Nuclear family
- Monogamy
- Intimacy
- Personal life
- Intimate life
- Cohabitation
- Ethnicity
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Can you think of examples of how globalisation, gender and localised cultural practices influence families? Compare and contrast your examples with those of your peers.

2. Is ‘family’ a concept that can give due weight to our meaningful relationships of support and care? What does the term ‘personal life’ suggest as an alternative to family?

3. Which relationships in your own life are particularly important at this time in providing you with care, social and emotional support? Are these all ‘family’ relationships?

4. How are the metaphors we use to conceptualise relationships important? For example, what are the implications of thinking of families as ‘units’ or ‘institutions’ or ‘practices’ as opposed to ‘woven webs of relationships’?

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING


