Sex is central to our understanding of the family as a social institution. As the starting point for procreation, sex supplies new family members and sustains the family lineage across time and generations. Sexuality is the basis for mate recruitment and pair-bonding. Kinship roles – mother and son, brother and sister – are delineated, in part, by sexual taboos and prohibitions against incest. Because sexuality goes to the core of family relations, families have a stake in the regulation of sexual behavior. The community standing and economic welfare of family members long depended on restricting couplings to approved unions that had access to an adequate level of material resources. As Malthus observed, having too many mouths to feed mired unfortunate families in poverty. Historically, the most effective way to keep the family’s consumption requirements in line with its resources was to limit births. In the absence of reliable contraception, this translated into two-pronged efforts to channel procreative sexual activity into marriage and to control which family members married and to whom.

In the face of the cultural trend toward greater permissiveness, it is easy to forget that socially sanctioned, sexual relationships used to be regarded as a demographic privilege. Marriage was an unequal life chance that differentiated the advantaged from the disadvantaged. Before the diffusion of birth-control practices made it possible to separate sexual pleasure from procreation, those who had the means to support a family were favored for marriage. Daughters who lacked a dowry and last-born sons who had no claim to the family farm lived out their lives without taking a mate, perhaps as dependents in the homes of married siblings on whom family fortunes were concentrated. In China, where female infanticide limited the supply of brides, many poor men never married, even as rich men took several wives and concubines (Lee and Feng, 1999). Thus, large segments of the population were denied routine access to sexual partners for their entire lives.

Just as differential access to economic resources meant unequal access to marital pleasures, gender inequality poses another obstacle to sexual parity. Women’s
sexuality has always been more strictly regulated than men’s. Unfaithful wives have been more severely sanctioned by family, community, and the law than have adulterous husbands (Lawson, 1988). Parents have been more concerned about preserving the chastity of their daughters than discouraging the sexual adventures of their sons. Of course, a family’s success in regulating sexuality depends on its social standing and economic circumstances. Poor parents who must work long hours have greater difficulty monitoring the sexual behavior of their adolescent children. Class and race define the limits of family control, if only because unequal power relations invite sexual exploitation. Calculated sexual exchanges with “social superiors” have a long history as a survival strategy (Quaife, 1979), poignantly among the most vulnerable and downtrodden. Family life has suffered from demoralizing, class-based sexual predations. Not being able to protect wives and daughters from sexual demands weighed heavily on subordinated men, whether they were Italian peasants (Schneider and Schneider, 1996) or American slaves (Patterson, 1998). Laws on sexual harassment demonstrate that the enduring problem of power-based sexual exploitation has followed middle-class women and female professionals into the contemporary workplace.

Once a demographic privilege, sexual relations, marriage, and parenthood have come to be widely regarded as individual rights, not family decisions. The drift of Western family law has been to remove the obstacles to marriage (Glendon, 1989). Parental approval is no longer required, except for the very young. Only the closest degree of blood kinship (e.g., brother–sister, parent–child) is considered too incestuous for marriage. Divorce is no longer an obstacle to a new match. Barriers to same-sex unions will undoubtedly be the next to fall. Cultural ideologies promoting self-determination and individual fulfillment have undermined popular support for the family control of marriage and sexuality (Frank and McEneaney, 1999). Unwed adolescents need not get their parent’s permission to obtain contraceptives, and wives need not seek their husband’s approval for an abortion. Just as family control over marriage has faded, fewer and fewer people regard sex outside of marriage as wrong. Except for lingering concerns about teenage motherhood, the stigma associated with nonmarital births has greatly diminished. Having removed some of the historical impediments to marriage and parenthood, contemporary social welfare states are now judged by their provision for female-headed families (O’Connor, Orloff, and Shaver, 1999). The upshot is intriguing patterns of consistency and change in public opinion and private behavior that shape the sex lives of young and old, married and single, heterosexual and nonheterosexual individuals.

**Youth Sex, Then and Now**

Young people’s sexuality has been the prime territory of family control. Generations of parents have struggled to help their offspring balance youthful desire and the need for pragmatic choices about marriage and childbearing. In law, these family concerns with youth are still embodied in parental-consent requirements for teen marriages (Glendon, 1989) as well as in minimum-age standards for sexual consent. Until fairly recently, there was widespread agreement that marriage should precede sex and childbearing. Today, families play an important role in the adolescent transition to adult sexuality, but formative sexual experiences increasingly occur at younger ages and outside of marriage. Responding to the potential threats of AIDS
and teen pregnancy, schools and communities have stepped up their efforts to augment family responsibility for teen sexuality.

Over time, however, norms against premarital sex have lost their force. American women who were born after 1900 were more likely than their older sisters to engage in premarital petting, and even sexual intercourse (Kinsey et al., 1953). In the past, unmarried couples experimented quietly with sex, but there was still strong pressure from family and community to marry if a pregnancy resulted. If their first birth were conceived before marriage, couples were placed at a disadvantage, because they married at a younger age and obtained less schooling (Freedman and Thornton, 1979). Most of these couples, however, overcame early disadvantage and went on to become homeowners with middle-class incomes and money in the bank. Births out of wedlock were a different story. Motherhood without marriage was stigmatized and economically perilous. Many single women sought illegal abortions or gave up their babies, rather than raise children alone. When sex did not lead to marriage, sexual activities of single people were managed quietly so as not to come to public attention.

Despite the reservations of family-life educators (Ericksen and Steffen, 1999), the sexual mores and family formation patterns of young people underwent major changes in both the US (Cherlin, 1992) and Britain (Lewis and Kiernan, 1996). Once relatively circumspect about their sexual activities, youth in the 1960s flaunted premarital sex by openly cohabiting (Wilhelm, 1998). Bowling to the inevitable, public opinion came to accept sex before marriage. Beginning in the 1960s, American disapproval of premarital sex declined sharply (Smith, 1994). Slower declines followed. Between 1972 and 1998, the number of Americans who considered premarital sex to be “always wrong” dropped from 37 percent to 24 percent, as older, more conservative cohorts were replaced by younger, more permissive generations (Treas, 2002). Cohort succession also powered declines in Britain (Scott, 1998). With the exception of Ireland, where 35 percent say premarital sex is “always wrong,” disapproval of premarital sex is very low elsewhere in the Western world (Widmer, Treas, and Newcomb, 1998). According to 1994 survey data, only 13 percent of Australians, 12 percent of the British, 12 percent of Canadians, 19 percent of New Zealanders, 7 percent of the Dutch, and 4 percent of Swedes think sex before marriage is “always wrong.”

With cohabitation and premarital sex practiced widely among young adults, attention shifted to adolescents. Although premarital sex is increasingly accepted, teen sex is still seen as problematic. In 1994, fully 71 percent of Americans and 67 percent of the British said sex between young teens (ages 14–16) was “always wrong” (Widmer, Treas, and Newcomb, 1998). Elsewhere, disapproval ranged from high levels in Catholic populations to moderate levels in Scandinavian countries: 84 percent in Ireland, 81 percent in Northern Ireland, 71 percent in New Zealand, 61 percent in Australia, 58 percent in Italy, 55 percent in Canada, 45 percent in the Netherlands, and 32 percent in Sweden. This moral disapproval reflects practical concerns about the long-run ramifications of early sexual activity as well as cultural assumptions about teenagers’ psychological immaturity, their irrationality, and their vulnerability to exploitation.

Since the 1950s in North America and Western Europe, age at first sex has declined by about three years for women (Teitler, 2002). The median age for males and females is somewhere between 17 and 18, except for southern Europe, where the median age for women is 19. The upshot of trends has been reductions in age-at-first-sex differences between countries, between social classes, between early and late initiators, and
between genders (ibid.). In Canada, the historical double standard in sexual initiation between adolescent males and females virtually disappeared (Maticka-Tundale, Barrett, and McKay, 2000). Since time spent in romantic relationships before first sex also seems to have increased, young people may arrive at their sexual debuts better equipped to communicate and manage couple relations than in the past (Teitler, 2002). Nearly four out of five American women, 15–44, reported that their first sex was with a steady partner, a fiancé, or a husband (Abma et al., 1997).

Having had sex does not translate into a particularly high level of sexual activity for teenagers, since even sexually active males have relatively low frequencies of intercourse and long periods without a partner (Sonenstein, Pleck, and Ku, 1991). However, young people are more likely than their seniors to have multiple partners, in part because their relationships are of relatively short duration. In 1992, 15 percent of sexually active American women, ages 14–22, and 35 percent of their male counterparts reported having more than one sex partner just in the last three months—a risk that increases with the use of alcohol (Santelli et al., 1998). Sexual scripts are complex and changing. More adolescent males in the US report some sort of heterosexual genital contact than report having actually had vaginal sex (Gates and Sonenstein, 2000). Males, ages 15–19, were significantly more likely to have been masturbated by a female in 1995 than in 1988, but they were less likely to have had vaginal intercourse (ibid.). The likelihood that a black female adolescent had had sexual intercourse also declined in the 1990s while use of condoms by adolescents increased (Santelli et al., 2000). Teenagers, especially those who first have sex at younger ages, are less likely to have used contraception than those who postponed their sexual debuts. Although first sexual experiences are often spontaneous, contraceptive planning for first sex is on the rise in the US (Abma et al., 1997). More than three-quarters of American women who had first intercourse in the early 1990s reported using some contraceptive method as opposed to only half of those whose sexual debut was prior to 1980. Younger women were most likely to have used condoms, while slightly older women favored birth-control pills, a method requiring even more foresight.

The Problem with Teenagers

There are certainly reasons for concern about teenagers who have sex. Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are prevalent among adolescents (although substantial cross-national differences suggest big gaps in the efficacy of education and prevention efforts). In the mid-1990s, gonorrhea infections reported per 100,000 young people, ages 15–19, numbered 596 in Russia, 572 in the US, 77 in England and Wales, 59 in Canada, and 2 in Sweden (Panchaud et al., 2000). Because early sex is sometimes coerced, teen sex raises concerns about sexual abuse of young people who are largely powerless and often unsophisticated. Fully 60 percent of American women who had first intercourse before age 15 reported they had been forced to have sex (Moore, Nord, and Peterson, 1989). The discovery that adult men sometimes fathered teenagers’ babies (Males and Chew, 1996) made sexual abuse of minors a further justification for a public health war on teen sex and pregnancy in the US. Formative sexual experiences resonate across the life-course. American women who, as children, had sexual contact with an adult are at greater risk of sexually transmitted disease, teenage childbearing, and multiple sex partners as an adult (Browning and Laumann, 1997). In France, sexual precocity intrudes on the
formation and maintenance of marital unions: those who are younger when they first have sex are less likely to marry, less likely to stay married, and more likely to have multiple sex partners (Bozon, 1996).

Of all the concerns with adolescent sexuality, however, teenage pregnancy receives the most attention, especially in the US. The difficulty is not so much that young women become pregnant as that they become single mothers. The 1950s’ baby boom also had its share of teenage mothers, but they were usually married teenagers. Because age at first intercourse declined while age at first marriage rose, women have been exposed at younger ages and for longer periods to the risk of unmarried pregnancy. Where out-of-wedlock pregnancies once led to marriage, they increasingly result in either abortion (now legalized) or single motherhood. And, in contrast to Europe, unmarried mothers are less likely to have the support of a steady cohabiting relationship (Teitler, 2002). To be sure, early twentieth-century social reformers were also alarmed about sexually active girls (Nathanson, 1991). Their concern was the damage to a woman’s marital prospects. Even during the Great Depression, a decade after the flappers of the 1920s first challenged premarital sex taboos, sexual propriety was still an asset in the marriage market: if she were conservative in her sexual behavior, an attractive, working-class girl stood a better chance of finding a middle-class husband (Elder, 1969). Today, having children outside of marriage reduces the chances a woman will marry (Upchurch, Lilliard and Panis, 2001), but high divorce rates demonstrate that marriage no longer offers women the security it once did. In fact, in California, a furor broke out over the revelation that social workers were trying to get men to marry their pregnant, underage partners, rather than sending these adult males to prison for statutory rape (Treas, 1999).

In keeping with the changes in women’s roles, contemporary concerns with teenage motherhood focus on career consequences, not marriage-market penalties (Nathanson, 1991). Early motherhood, it is argued, consigns women to poverty by disrupting schooling and careers. The children of teen mothers are also a concern, because they are disadvantaged in terms of birth weight and cognitive development (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1994). With US teen pregnancy in 1997 at its lowest level in 20 years, Jeffrey P. Koplan, Director for the Center for Disease Control, explained the broad benefits of this trend: “Few teens are ready for the challenges of parenthood. When they delay this responsibility, it enables them to gain the education and maturity they need to be good parents and good citizens” (National Center on Health Statistics, 2001).

Since the mid-1970s, teen childbearing has declined in Europe as well as the US, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia (Teitler, 2002). US rates remain markedly higher than those of other developed countries. Rates are higher still for African Americans (Singh, Darroch, and Frost, 2001). They are lower for immigrants, a pattern that also holds for Canada (Maticka-Tundale, Barrett, and McKay, 2000) and Britain (Singh, Darroch, and Frost, 2001). In the early and mid-1990s, there were 57 babies born to every 1,000 American women, ages 15–19, as compared to 29 in Britain, 11 in Germany, and 4 in Japan (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1998). Since Americans disapprove of teen sex, their general lack of candor about sexual matters has been faulted for sending mixed messages that contribute to teen pregnancy (Jones et al., 1986). This cultural explanation may be insufficient, if only because teen-age childbearing in English-speaking countries closely tracks trends in adult fertility (Teitler, 2002). Disadvantage increases the likelihood of early childbearing in both the US and Britain (Singh, Darroch, and Frost, 2001). The US stands
out in terms of teen pregnancy rates, in part, because it has proportionately more poor people than Britain does. Regardless of socioeconomic level, American teens are less likely to use contraceptives and more likely to have a baby than their British counterparts. This points to policy differences — less access in the US to contraception due to the lack of a national health system and less vigorous government efforts to reduce the socioeconomic disadvantages that shape the childbearing choices of young people (Singh, Darroch, and Frost, 2001).

Numerous antecedents of teen sexual activity and teen pregnancy have been identified, including psychological dispositions, hormone levels, partner dynamics, poverty, school problems, risk-taking (e.g., substance abuse), religious beliefs, and community context (Mott et al., 1996; Udry, 1988; Brewster, Billy and Grady, 1993; Sucoff and Upchurch, 1998; Singh, Darroch, and Frost, 2001; Kirby, 2001). Although peers are important, families remain powerful influences. Parents determine the broad circumstances of their children’s upbringing, communicate and model their own values, and monitor their offspring’s behavior. Through various pathways, family disruption leads to having sex at an earlier age (Kiernan and Hobcraft, 1997). Because low parental education and family disruption contribute to teen pregnancy, the ups and downs in teen birth rates in the US have been driven, in part, by demographic trends in broader family structure (Manlove et al., 2000).

At the intimate level of the household, however, teens are less likely to pursue risky sexual behavior when they have a good relationship with a parent who disapproves of such conduct. For example, positively perceived mother-child relationships, maternal disapproval of teen sex, and maternal discussion about birth control deter sexual activity and promote consistent contraceptive use among African American teens (Jaccaud, Dittus, and Gordon, 1996). Perhaps because AIDS increased the urgency of parent–child communication about sex, 70 percent of young black and Hispanic adolescents say that parents have discussed STDs with them, but fewer report parent–child conversations about contraception and other aspects of sexuality (Miller et al., 1998). Teenagers talk about sex more readily with their mothers than with their fathers (ibid.), a finding that holds not only for heterosexuals, but also for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youngsters (D’Augelli, Hershberger, and Pilkinson, 1998). Growing up in an unfavorable family environment (e.g., living apart from parents before age 14 or having parents who drink heavily or use illegal drugs) greatly increases the likelihood that women will have been sexually abused (Moore, Nord, and Peterson, 1989). On the other hand, parental support and monitoring reduce the number of sex partners, especially for teens with troubling histories of sexual abuse (Luster and Small, 1997).

Few people today view families as sufficient to prevent teen pregnancy or AIDS. Americans favor sex education in the schools by nearly seven to one (National Opinion Research Center, 2002), although parents can refuse to let their youngsters participate. Conservatives advocate “Just Say No” abstinence programs, but others support candid instruction about sexuality and safe sex. Evaluation studies show that abstinence-only programs do not deter sex, nor do discussions of contraception lead to a rise in sexual intercourse (Kirby, 1997). Effective programs give the facts about the risks of unprotected sex and methods of protection (ibid.). They have specific goals, such as changing behavioral norms (rather just giving students information on which to choose) (Kirby, 2001). They have teachers who are committed and trained, and they teach strategies for communicating, negotiating, and saying no to peer and partner pressure. Since teens facing poor schooling and job prospects are at high risk
of pregnancy, youth development programs offering counseling, tutoring, and job placement can also affect adolescent sexual choices. Whatever its content and efficacy, sex education is a staple of American adolescence. Although only 51 percent of women ages 40–44 had had formal sex education by age 18, the figure stood at 96 percent for 18- and 19-year-olds in 1995 (Abma et al., 1997).

FROM PROCREATION TO PLEASURE IN MARRIAGE

At least in Western societies, the marital sex act has been endowed with remarkable importance. Consistent with early Christianity’s preoccupation with reproduction, the failure to consummate a marriage was sufficient grounds to annul the union. Marital sex, however, has been shrouded in privacy, despite its importance to pair bonding and the perpetuation of the family. Fortunately, demographers have been able to infer some changes in sexual practices across the centuries from declines in marital fertility. Separating sexual pleasure in marriage from its reproductive consequences stands as an important achievement in family life.

Besides the trend to smaller families, evidence of the marital fertility transition is seen in the fact that married women stopped having babies at younger ages and at lower parities. Birth control, once unthinkable and tainted by its association with illicit sex, ultimately found a place within the realm of conscious choice and domestic respectability. At the end of the eighteenth century, as Thomas Robert Malthus scolded about the improper arts employed to avoid the reproductive consequences of sexual relations, married couples in rural France were altering their sexual practices — using abstinence and withdrawal to prevent pregnancy. These demanding contraceptive methods required partners to cooperate and sacrifice sexual pleasure to reduce family size. Today’s couples are the beneficiaries of a long political struggle to legalize the distribution of birth-control information as well as many scientific advances in contraceptive methods. Partners enjoy less obtrusive and more reliable means of contraception. As a consequence, married couples can and do have spontaneous, pleasure-oriented sex without giving much thought to the possibility of unwanted pregnancy.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, there remain few, if any, differentials in contraceptive practice in the US. Whites and blacks, Catholics and Protestants, are equally and universally likely to use modern family planning. Nor is contraception just a stopping strategy that couples adopt after achieving their desired family size. Couples use contraception to prevent premarital pregnancy, to time the first birth, and to space later ones — in short, to synchronize biology with the complex timetables of family, work, and leisure. While couples once structured their sex lives to avoid pregnancy, they must now self-consciously reorganize their sexual practices in order to make babies.

MAKING MARRIAGE EROTIC

The separation of sexual pleasure from procreation has eroticized partnered relationships. Coital frequency, for example, increased among married Americans in the 1970s when legal abortion and the pill reduced the fear of pregnancy (Ryder and Westoff, 1977). We know relatively little about the intimate details of married life in the more distant past. Victorian ideals of sexual restraint would have us believe that
the marriage bed was a rather sedate place, where sexually inhibited women resigned themselves to thinking about God, country, and their wallpaper patterns. The surprising discovery of Clelia Mosher’s unpublished sex questionnaires has challenged this view: the college-educated American wives whom she surveyed between 1892 and 1920 viewed nonprocreative sex in a generally favorable light, even if their cautious endorsements hinged on their spiritual aspirations, rather than on rapturous coital experience (Ericksen and Steffen, 1999). Without discounting the importance of marital sex to earlier generations, marriage has become more erotic in many ways. Husbands and wives hold high expectations for sexual aspects of their relationship.

The twentieth century saw the development of a new middle-class family norm—the companionate marriage. While previous generations had been content with an instrumental partnership dictating separate spheres for husband and wife, the modern companionate model called on married couples to find their satisfaction in the intimacy of their shared lives. Sex was a key component in this new marriage model. “Sexperts,” including family-life educators, advice columnists, and marriage counselors, emphasized that sexual compatibility and mutual satisfaction were essential to marital happiness (Ericksen and Steffen, 1999). Americans took this advice to heart. A study of US college students over six decades reports that both men and women increasingly came to regard mutual attraction as important in mate choice (Buss et al., 2001).

Making marriage satisfyingly erotic called for instruction in sexual techniques. Given reigning ideas about gender differences in sexual responsiveness, pedagogical attention was devoted to discouraging the female inhibitions and male boorishness that were thought to impede orgasms for wives and sexual satisfaction for their husbands. Experts promoted this view of sex and marriage (Ericksen and Steffen, 1999). For example, Ideal Marriage, the bestselling marriage manual by the Dutch physician, Theodoor Van de Velde, was popular reading for American couples through most of the first half of the twentieth century (Bullough, 1994). Van de Velde’s message was that wives, not just husbands, could enjoy sex, given good communication, patience, and a loving and skilled partner. Detailing ten coital positions, Van de Velde encouraged orgasms, preferably simultaneous ones, as well as noncoital sex and foreplay, to enhance the coital experience. The book’s explicit discussion of marital sex illustrates the trend toward greater knowledge about sexual biology and greater candor about sexual behavior.

Each new generation of brides and grooms knows more about physiology, reproduction, and sexual practices than did their own parents. This is, in part, a consequence of the spread of family planning, which includes at least a rudimentary dose of sex education. However, there is also greater openness about sexual matters. In the 1930s, US decency codes dictated that movies show even married couples in separate beds. After the 1950s, sexually explicit material, ranging from birth-control information to pornography, became more widely available in the US due to court cases confirming Constitutional protections of free speech. Today, Van de Velde’s legacy is evident in women’s magazines where articles such as “How to Share His Secret Sex Dream” are sandwiched between domestic features on cooking and child rearing. Once considered only as erotica for men, sex videos are now marketed as education and entertainment for heterosexual couples.

Compared to their parents’ generation, married couples not only know more about sex, but also have more first-hand sexual experience. The 1920s marked a watershed
for premarital sexual experimentation in the US (Kinsey et al., 1953). While the honeymoon was once a momentous sexual initiation, 70 percent of men and 58 percent of women in recent US birth cohorts (i.e., 1963–74) report having had vaginal intercourse with their mate before marriage (Laumann et al., 1994). Sex is an integral part of courtship, as indicated by the fact that only 6 percent of male and 16 percent of female respondents in Britain reported that they first had sexual intercourse at marriage (Wells et al., 1994). More and more newlyweds have shared a bed as cohabitators. By the late 1980s, half of recently married Americans had cohabited (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989). Increasingly, marriages involve a husband and/or a bride who has been married before. As the sexual practices of single and married people converged, sexual advice books stopped being called marriage manuals, because they had a much broader audience.

Married couples elaborate their sexual scripts to include more sexual practices than in the past. According to Kinsey and associates (1953), married women born after 1900 were more adventurous than their predecessors—fondling the male genitalia, making love in the nude, and being on top during sexual intercourse. The trend to a more diverse repertoire of sexual practices has continued. Although leveling off for recent cohorts, lifetime experience with oral sex increased sharply between the Great Depression cohorts (born 1933–7) and the cutting edge of the Baby Boom (1948–52). Among 25–29-year-old American women in the 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSL), 76 percent reported ever having given oral sex as compared to 39 percent of women aged 55–59 (Laumann et al., 1994). British data from the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Life Styles confirm similar trends in experience with oral sex (Wells et al., 1994). Rising living standards have abetted sexual experimentation, because married couples enjoy unprecedented privacy. While having preschool children can interfere with a couple’s sex life (Donnelly, 1993), married people no longer face the constraints of earlier times when several family members often shared a room or even a bed.

To be sure, some groups remain relatively conventional in their sexual practices (Mahay, Laumann, and Michaels, 2001). Americans display greater variation in sexual behavior than do the British (Michael et al., 2001). Even controlling for factors such as age, marital status, and education, white Americans are significantly more likely to have oral sex than are Mexican Americans and African Americans. Within racial groups, college-educated Americans follow less conventional sexual scripts than do persons with less schooling. Similarly, in Britain, social class is positively associated with oral, anal, and nonpenetrative sex for both men and women (Wells et al., 1994).

The Sex Lives of Married People

While today’s married couples may be more adventurous than earlier generations, many husbands and wives settle into fairly routine, if largely satisfying, sex lives. Among British informants who had vaginal sex in the past year, married people are less likely to report having oral, anal, and nonpenetrative sex than their cohabiting or unmarried counterparts (Wells et al., 1994). In the US, married people are, if anything, less likely to have incorporated oral sex into their last sex act than are unmarried people (Laumann et al., 1994), perhaps because married people devote less time to their sexual encounters than singles do. Only 9 percent of married men
said their last sexual event lasted an hour or more, compared to 38 percent of noncohabiting, never-married men (Laumann et al., 1994).

Married people have higher coital frequency than do singles. Having a regular sex partner, married people in Britain have sex more often than do the unmarried; the coital frequency of married persons is slightly lower than that of cohabiters, however, even controlling for the fact that cohabiters are younger (Wellings et al., 1994). There is not much evidence that married people have more physically pleasurable sex than other people, but married women do say that they derive more emotional satisfaction from their sexual relations than do cohabiting and single women (Waite, 2001). Is sex really the key to a happy marriage, as family life educators long argued? Affectionate ties and low conflict are associated with greater sexual attraction and frequency (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983). About 16 percent of co-resident married people in the US (excluding those who were sick, had recently given birth or were pregnant) admitted that they had not had sex in the last month. Certainly, couples that never have sex tend to be unhappy and to have thought about separating (Donnelley, 1993). Coital frequency, however, is a poor gauge of marital quality, because high levels of sexual activity also occur in violent marriages, where husbands use physical threats to extort sex from their wives (DeMaris, 1997).

Coital frequency declines with duration of unions (Wellings et al., 1994), no doubt reflecting both habituation (i.e., novelty wears off) and the biological effects of aging. Older men report higher levels of sexual dysfunction (Laumann, Paik, and Rosen, 2001). Men aged 50–59 were three times more likely to say that they were disinterested in sex or had erection problems than were their counterparts aged 18–29. Women were less likely to report sexual problems with increasing age. Certainly, couples no longer take it for granted that menopause or advancing years mark the end of a sexual relationship. According to a US survey, half of married persons 60 and older had had sex in the last month—about four times a month, on average (Marsiglio and Donnelley, 1991). One-quarter of married people 76 and older were still sexually active. Until fairly recently, erotic interests among older people were regarded as humorous and unseemly, and their physical attractiveness and capacity for sex were discounted. Just as Viagra and hormone replacement therapy reduced the physical impediments to sex in later life, a host of popular sex books by physicians and scientists have offered up an enthusiastic prognosis for sex in middle age and beyond. Conveniently, Love and Sex after 60 was published in a large-print edition (Butler and Lewis, 1996).

Extramarital Sex

Most people believe that it is wrong for married people to have sexual relations with anybody except their marital partner. Fully 80 percent of Americans and 67 percent of the British say extramarital sex is “always wrong” (Widmer, Treas, and Newcomb, 1998). Similar views are voiced in Australia (59 percent), Canada (68 percent), Ireland (80 percent), Japan (58 percent), The Netherlands (63 percent), New Zealand (75 percent), Sweden (68 percent), and other Western countries. Although some people agree that extenuating circumstances can sometimes justify extramarital sex, virtually none of the respondents in this cross-national survey say that extramarital sex is “not at all wrong.” In the US and Britain, only 2 percent saw nothing wrong with extramarital sex. Nor is there any evidence that moral judgments on extramarital sex
are softening. British condemnation remains high (Scott, 1998). If anything, disapproval has increased in the US since the mid-1980s, perhaps in response to fears about AIDS (Treas, in press). Although women are more disapproving than men of extramarital sex, US data show that the gender gap narrowed after the mid-1980s when men adopted harsher views (Scott, 1998).

Despite a culture that accepts a wider range of sexual behavior, the importance of monogamy and sexual exclusivity in marriage is scarcely questioned. Fully 99 percent of married Americans say that they expect their partner to be sexually exclusive, as do 94 percent of cohabiting heterosexuals (Treas and Giesen, 2000). Among Europeans surveyed in the 1980s, 84 percent said that faithfulness was very important for a successful marriage (Harding and Phillips, 1986). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, "swinging" and "wife-swapping," a couple-oriented lifestyle of sexual adventuring, offered a brief, ideological challenge to sexual exclusivity. In the 1980s, this social innovation fell victim to sexual jealousies and fears of AIDS. Although some people may fall short of the ideal, the notion of limiting the sex lives of married people to marriage goes largely uncontested. Even though they are almost never enforced, laws against adultery remain on the books in many US states, because religious groups argue for their symbolic importance in supporting marriage and promoting sexual morality.

Men are more likely to be unfaithful than are women (Treas and Giesen, 2000). At elevated risk of infidelity are those married people who have greater interest in sex and greater sexual experience. Conservative sexual values and frequent attendance at religious services, on the other hand, buffer against the risk of infidelity. Having opportunities to meet potential sex partners outside of the company of one's spouse increases the likelihood of infidelity. Americans whose jobs place them in intimate contact with others are more likely to be unfaithful (ibid.). Similarly, British men and women who work away from home overnight are more likely to report having had multiple sex partners than do others (Wellings et al., 1994). Although social class may be positively associated with sexual infidelity among the British (ibid.), socioeconomic indicators have little effect on the extramarital behavior of Americans (Treas and Giesen, 2000).

Intimate social networks can promote sexual fidelity. In-laws, for example, monitor behavior, stabilize the union with support, and generally constitute a relationship-specific asset that would be put at risk by marital indiscretions. Individuals who know and enjoy their partner's family and friends are more likely to be sexually exclusive than are individuals without such intimate ties (ibid.). Although most cohabiters advocate sexual exclusivity just like married people, they are at higher risk of sexual infidelity, even controlling for the shorter duration of their unions and their more permissive sexual values (ibid.). This is generally attributed to the fact that cohabiters have lower investments in their unions -- and less to lose -- than do married people. Those who report lower subjective satisfaction with their relationship are also more likely to be unfaithful.

Sexual infidelity is seen as a danger to ongoing unions (Lawson, 1988), because it taps deeply held feelings of sexual jealousy and partner possession, diverts time and energy from the marital relationship, poses risks to health and reputation, and compromises sex as a basis for pair-bonding. Women, who tend to view affection as a requisite for sex, are more likely than men to describe extramarital sex as a threat to the relationship (Glass and Wright, 1992). By the same token, a married woman having an extramarital relationship is more likely to be perceived as being in
love, committed, and ready to marry than is a man (Sprecher, Regan, and McKinney, 1998).

Despite clinical and anecdotal evidence, the nature of the association between extramarital sex and divorce remains uncertain. We do not know how frequently sexual infidelity figures in the breakdown of a marriage. Tellingly, 40 percent of recently divorced Americans said their spouse was involved with someone else before the marriage ended, but only 15 percent of these respondents admitted that they themselves were extramaritally involved (South and Lloyd, 1995). Neither is the link between extramarital sex and marital quality well understood. Although some studies report an association between infidelity and low marital satisfaction (Treas and Giesen, 2000), there is a lack of longitudinal data to assess the extent to which marital unhappiness causes infidelity as opposed to infidelity causing marital unhappiness. Although adultery may upset marital relationships, a new sexual relationship is also a strategy for exiting an unhappy marriage. Respondents' retrospective accounts of their relationships may be self-serving rationalizations. Divorced and separated persons who have had extramarital sex insist that their own infidelity was caused by marital problems, even as they maintain that their spouse's infidelity was a cause of their marital difficulties (Spanier and Margolis, 1983).

Although sexual infidelity is a private matter, it maintains a high cultural profile, as evidenced by the fact that extramarital sex is almost as common as marital sex on American television series (Lowry, 2000). Media preoccupation with adultery may explain why married Americans believe that other married people do not take fidelity as seriously as they do (Greeley, 1991). Despite adultery's high profile, empirical data do not show sexual infidelity run rampant. Recent US estimates for the percentage of married persons with a secondary sex partner in the last year range from 1.5 percent to 3.6 percent (Smith 1991; Choi, Catania, and Dolcini, 1994; Leigh, Temple, and Trocki, 1993). In Britain, 4.5 percent of married men aged 16–59 and 1.9 percent of comparable women reported two or more heterosexual partners in the last year (Wellings et al., 1994). While extramarital sex is under-reported, these low figures are in keeping with public opinion about the importance of sexual exclusivity in marriage.

**Making Same-Sex Relationships Domestic**

In Britain in the early 1990s, 1.1 percent of men and 0.4 percent of women reported having at least one same-sex partner during the past year (Wellings et al., 1994). In the US, the figures were 2.7 percent for men and 1.3 percent for women (Laumann et al., 1994), although large cities with established communities of gays and lesbians have higher concentrations. So long as gays and lesbians remained a marginalized minority pursuing closeted lives to avoid harassment and discrimination, the heterosexual public saw them largely in terms of exotic sexual practices, deviations from conventional gender roles, and presumed psychological pathology. Little thought was given to the possibility that gays and lesbians had families, much less confronted some of the same family challenges as heterosexuals. As acceptance of same-sex relations has increased, public discourse on gays and lesbians no longer revolves around their sexual lifestyles. Increasingly, nonheterosexuals are seen to share family and relationship concerns that resonate with heterosexuals. Gillian Dunne (2000: 31) points out that the presence of children in lesbian unions not only smoothes
relations between women and their own parents, but more generally “helps make intelligible a lifestyle that can appear strange and ‘other’ to heterosexual observers.” More widely appreciated by the general public, the domestic aspects of the lives of lesbians and gays have given rise to family policy initiatives and a growing research literature on nonheterosexuals as partners and parents.

The decriminalization of homosexual activity represents a legal revolution in values around the globe. This liberalization in the law has been attributed to the ideological trends favoring sex for pleasure over sex for procreative ends (Frank and McEneaney, 1999). Progress protecting private rights to sexual pleasure has been followed by political efforts to secure parity with heterosexuals in other domains, including housing, employment, and family. Public discourse has shifted from the sex lives of gays and lesbians to broader issues. Although coverage of nonheterosexuals in US news magazines of the 1980s focused on AIDS and sexual lifestyles, the top story in the early 1990s was a civil rights issue, the treatment of gays in the military service (Bennett, 2000). The defining concerns for lesbians and gays reach beyond sex and sexual orientation to embrace the broader family realm.

The AIDS crisis that integrated and mobilized the homosexual community brought to the fore the difficulties that confront caring relationships that do not conform to heterosexual family conventions. A spate of new legislation has recognized domestic partnerships and extended rights to nonheterosexual unions. This is a signal accomplishment, because until recently, lesbians and gays were regarded as irrelevant to the institution of marriage. In Europe and the US, there was no need for laws to bar marriages between gay men or between lesbians, because same-sex unions were conceived as being entirely outside of the scope of the marital institution (Glendon, 1989). Despite progress, nonheterosexuals have not achieved parity with heterosexuals when it comes to family life. As recently as 1990, 89 percent of respondents in the British Social Attitudes Survey did not think male homosexual couples should be allowed to adopt a baby under the same conditions as heterosexual couples; 81 percent voiced the same reservations about lesbian couples (Hayes, 1997). (Ironically, Americans preferred gays and lesbians to heterosexual men as babysitters, presumably because heterosexual males are not thought to be as well suited to nurturing activities (Regan and Ramirez, 2000).) To underscore the continuing resistance to incorporating nonheterosexuals into American family life, a politically conservative, highly religious social movement cites homosexuality’s threat to families as a justification for opposing gay rights.

Despite resistance, gays and lesbians find greater acceptance today. Americans condemning same-sex relations as “always wrong” dropped from 77 percent in 1988 to 58 percent in 1998 (Treas, 2002). In Britain, disapproval also declined (Scott, 1998). While the growing tolerance of premarital sex was due to the replacement of conservative cohorts by more liberal ones, the greater acceptance of homosexual sex resulted because cohorts actually became more tolerant over time (Treas, in press). In a striking case of the diffusion of cultural innovations, less educated Americans moved closer to the permissive views of college graduates. Although conservative religious denominations oppose homosexuality, all but the most frequent American churchgoers softened their views on same-sex relations between 1988 and 1998. Men are less tolerant than women, no doubt because misogyny and homophobia are the cornerstones of hegemonic masculinity. Women’s interest in the emotional content of relations may account for their greater sympathy for same-sex relationships (Scott, 1998). Not surprisingly, gender differences play out in families, where
nonheterosexuals are more likely to disclose their sexual orientation to female than male relatives (D’Augelli, Hershberger, and Pilkington, 1998; Mays et al., 1998).

In part in response to rejection by kin, gays and lesbians have broadened notions of family to include voluntary ties of affection incorporating friends, lovers, ex-lovers, and others. As Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan point out in chapter 20 of this volume, nonheterosexuals define family as “the families we choose,” broad networks of supportive friendships that are forged not by blood and marriage, but out of affection and reciprocity (Weston, 1991; Nardi, 1999). The families-of-choice notion is part of a self-conscious effort by lesbians and gays not only to distinguish their family lives from those of their heterosexual counterparts, but even to argue for the superiority of their more voluntary and egalitarian relationships. There is a tension, of course, between constructions of family difference and efforts to define nonheterosexuals as just like heterosexuals, particularly in terms of parenting qualifications. An emerging research literature is beginning to clarify these assertions, pointing particularly to differences that emerge from the gender of partners, as opposed to their sexual orientation or practices.

Because they cannot rely on ready-made scripts based on gender differences to govern their relationships, gay and lesbian partnerships are organized along more egalitarian lines than heterosexual unions. While housework usually falls to women in heterosexual couples, gay and lesbian partners are more likely to split the chores (Kurdek, 1993; Sullivan, 1996). Lesbians often share the tasks, perhaps consistent with the high levels of relationship quality that they report (Kurdek, 2001). Same-sex partners have more autonomy than do heterosexual ones (Kurdek, 1998). For example, gay couples are less concerned with monogamy than are heterosexuals or lesbians (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983). As studies of heterosexual cohabiters have suggested (Brines and Joyner, 1999), equality is not just an ideological commitment, but also the necessary precondition for stability in unions that lack the protection and presumed continuity of marriage. Without formal marriage, gay partners face fewer barriers to ending a union (Kurdek, 1998). They get less support from family members than do heterosexual couples without children (Kurdek, 2001), and the upshot is more frequent relationship break-ups, at least for gay men (Kurdek, 1998).

Other research has addressed outcomes for children raised by parents who are not heterosexual. Estimates for the US suggest that only 1 percent of children, ages 18 and younger, have a parent who self-identifies as nonheterosexual (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001). Scholarly accounts have focused on lesbians (but see Dunne, 2001), because gay men do not raise children as frequently. Although lesbians sometimes become mothers via donor insemination (Dunne, 2000), children of lesbians are usually the products of an earlier, heterosexual marriage (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001). Studies typically conclude that parents’ sexual orientation is of little consequence for the development of offspring. Others charge that the interpretation of data has been colored by sympathetic reactions against the negative stereotyping of nonheterosexuals. The small but real differences observed between children raised by heterosexual and nonheterosexual parents, they argue, have been downplayed (Cameron, 1997; Stacey and Biblarz, 2001). A careful reading of more rigorous psychological research on child outcomes suggests that the nonbiological parent in a lesbian partnership is more intimately involved in the child’s life than the typical father—although this is probably a function of the gender of lesbians, rather than their sexual orientation (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001). Despite their remarkable creativity in negotiating innovative ways of parenting (Dunne, 2000), it is testimony to heterosexual hegemony that
even lesbian couples, who typically embrace egalitarian relationships, sometimes fall back on a conventional breadwinner-and-caregiver division of labor in order to give their children an “ordinary” family life (Sullivan, 1996). As for outcomes for nonheterosexuals’ children, they come under less parental pressure to conform to rigid gender stereotypes and so they do not. They are also more open to homoerotic relationships (although they do not seem to be more likely to self-identify as gay or lesbian) (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001). Of course, sexual orientation and dyad gender composition may not be the only explanation for parenting differences between heterosexuals and nonheterosexuals. Lesbian mothers are apt to be older, more likely to live in an urban area, less politically conservative, and so on, and these differences may contribute to observed differences in parent roles or child outcomes.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

Family control of sexuality once meant avoiding out-of-wedlock births and social disapproval by channeling sexuality into marriage. Norms about sexual behavior have changed, the lives of adolescents and young adults follow a less predictable course. Fewer and fewer young people fulfill the traditional expectation that marriage should occur before having sex, living together, siring children, becoming pregnant, or producing babies. Because age at first sex has declined and age at first marriage has risen, there is now a yawning gap of years that many young people fill by exploring various sexual practices with different sexual partners. This behavior is not without risks, especially in the US, where unprotected sex results in higher rates of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease. Rather than discrediting the family’s control of sexuality, these changes serve to highlight the importance of family structure, parent–child communication, and parental values for young people, who navigate their early sexual experiences more successfully when they have a positive family context.

Early sexual experience echoes through the life-course, affecting subsequent sexual behavior and even the likelihood of marriage and divorce. Premarital sex spills over into marriage. Given greater sexual sophistication, reliable contraception, and a companionate ideal of marriage, twentieth-century marriage became more erotic. Couples come to marriage with a much broader repertoire of sexual experience and practices than in the past. Committed – at least ideologically – to sexual fidelity, married couples today can expect to have mutually satisfying physical relations that will continue well into old age. Thus, most of the life-course – from early adolescence to the far side of old age – is sexualized. Disapproval of same-sex relations also declined. Paradoxically, as heterosexual unions became sexier, same-sex ones came to be seen as struggling with domestic concerns such as partnering and parenting that take their toll on the sex lives of married heterosexuals. Thus, heterosexual marriage has been eroticized, even as sex has receded as the defining characteristic of same-sex relationships.

**References**


