

FAST FACTS

1. Among adults younger than 35, roughly 61% live without a spouse or partner. In 2017 the median household income for partnered adults was \$86,000, versus \$61,000 for unpartnered adults.
2. Nearly 33% of the U.S. adult population share a household with at least one “extra adult” (e.g., an adult child, a sibling, an elderly parent, or an unrelated housemate). This percentage, measured in 2017, is up from 14% in 1995.
3. Since the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court ruling legalizing same-sex marriage nationwide (*Obergefell v. Hodges*), the percentage of same-sex cohabiting couples who are married has risen from 38% to 61%. LGBTQ Americans who marry are twice as likely as the general public to cite legal rights and benefits as a very important reason to marry.
4. Ten percent of Americans today say they would oppose a close relative marrying someone of a different race or ethnicity — down from 32% in 2000. The percentage of nonblack Americans who would oppose a relative marrying a black person has dropped from 63% in 1990 to 14% today.
5. Among 41 countries studied by the Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation, the United States is the only country that does not mandate any paid leave for new parents. Several countries offer a year or more of paid leave.
6. Nearly 450,000 American children live in foster care. Drug abuse by a parent is associated with roughly a third of the cases in which a child is removed from home.
7. Estimates of the number of Americans in polyamorous (multiple-partner) relationships vary widely — from 1.2 to 9.8 million people, according to Internet polyamory sites.

Data from (1), (2), (3), (4) Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/11/the-share-of-americans-living-without-a-partner-has-increased-especially-among-young-adults/>; <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/31/more-adults-now-share-their-living-space-driven-in-part-by-parents-living-with-their-adult-children/>; <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/26/same-sex-marriage/>; <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/12/key-facts-about-race-and-marriage-50-years-after-loving-v-virginia/>; (5) Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF2_1_Parental_leave_systems.pdf; (6) “Number of Children in Foster Care Continues to Increase,” US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, November 30, 2017; (7) Elisabeth Sheff, *The Polyamorists Next Door: Inside Multiple-Partner Relationships and Families* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 3.

THE FAMILY MAY BE THE ORIGINAL CULTURAL INSTITUTION; people lived in families long before they invented the wheel, began farming, or founded cities. You might think that by now we would have clear and stable ideas about what defines a family, how families form and dissolve, what forms they can take, and how they can best raise their children, but such absolutely fundamental elements of family life have shifted dramatically through the centuries and continue to change today — perhaps faster than ever before. The most dramatic recent change in the United States is the groundswell of support for same-sex marriage: marriage equality, a concept almost unheard of thirty years ago, is now being claimed as a fundamental human right. Other changes are garnering fewer headlines but nonetheless are reshaping the values and behaviors we associate with family life. Both divorce and cohabitation have become more common and less stigmatized, and “singlehood” has gained traction as a perfectly normal alternative to marriage. An increasing number of adult Americans are now living in multigenerational families, whose larger households help them economize in tough times as well as provide for elderly members. Meanwhile, birth control, reproductive technologies, surrogacy, and genetic screening for heritable diseases are giving people more choices about whether, when, and how to have children.

Although experts agree that family and marriage are changing, there is little consensus about what these changes mean. Are we witnessing the collapse of family values, or a welcome evolution beyond restrictive and discriminatory models of family life? Central to this cultural debate is the traditional nuclear family — Dad, Mom, a couple of kids, maybe a dog, and a spacious suburban home. Millions of Americans aspire to this middle-class “model family,” while others see it as limiting, unattainable, or simply outdated. Whatever value you, your family, or your community may place on the nuclear family, it’s important to recognize that it has been around only a short time, especially when compared with the long history of the family itself.

In fact, what we call the “traditional” family, headed by a breadwinner-father and a housewife-mother, has existed for little more than two hundred years, and the suburbs came into being only in the 1950s. But the family as a social institution was legally recognized in Western culture at least as far back as the Code of Hammurabi, created in ancient Mesopotamia some four thousand years ago. To appreciate how profoundly concepts of family life have changed, consider the absolute power of the Mesopotamian father, the patriarch: the law allowed him to use any of his dependents, including his wife, as collateral for loans or even to sell family members outright to pay his debts.

Although patriarchal authority was less absolute in Puritan America, fathers remained the undisputed heads of families. Seventeenth-century Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire enacted laws condemning rebellious children to severe punishment and, in extreme cases, to death. In the early years of the American colonies, as in Western culture stretching back to Hammurabi’s time, unquestioned authority within the family served as both the model for and the basis of state authority. Just as family members owed complete obedience to the father, so all citizens owed unquestioned loyalty to the king and his legal representatives. In his influential volume *Democracy in America* (1835), French

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aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville describes the relationship between the traditional European family and the old political order:

Among aristocratic nations, social institutions recognize, in truth, no one in the family but the father; children are received by society at his hands; society governs him, he governs them. Thus, the parent not only has a natural right, but acquires a political right to command them; he is the author and the support of his family; but he is also its constituted ruler.

By the mid-eighteenth century, however, new ideas about individual freedom and democracy were stirring the colonies. And by the time Tocqueville visited the United States in 1831, they had evidently worked a revolution in the family as well as in the nation's political structure. He observes: "When the condition of society becomes democratic, and men adopt as their general principle that it is good and lawful to judge of all things for one's self, . . . the power which the opinions of a father exercise over those of his sons diminishes, as well as his legal power." To Tocqueville, this shift away from strict patriarchal rule signaled a change in the emotional climate of families: "as manners and laws become more democratic, the relation of father and son becomes more intimate and more affectionate; rules and authority are less talked of, confidence and tenderness are oftentimes increased, and it would seem that the natural bond is drawn closer." In Tocqueville's view, the American family heralded a new era in human relations. Freed from the rigid hierarchy of the past, parents and children could meet as near equals, joined by "filial love and fraternal affection."

This vision of the democratic family—a harmonious association of parents and children united by love and trust—has mesmerized popular culture in the United States. From the nineteenth century to the present, popular novels, magazines, music, and advertising images have glorified the comforts of loving domesticity. For several decades we have absorbed our strongest impressions of the family from television. In the 1950s we watched the Andersons on *Father Knows Best*, the Stones on *The Donna Reed Show*, and the real-life Nelson family on *The Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet*—shows which portrayed the mythical American family as happy, healthy, and modestly affluent. Over the next three decades the model stretched to include single parents, second marriages, and interracial adoptions on *My Three Sons*, *The Brady Bunch*, and *Diff'rent Strokes*, but the underlying ideal of wise, loving parents and harmonious happy families remained unchanged. More recently, our collective vision of the family has grown more complicated. In shows like *The Sopranos*, *Sister Wives*, *Here and Now*, *Transparent*, *The Fosters*, and *This Is Us*, we encounter not only diverse families (for example, same-sex, multiracial, or polygamous households), but also a wide range of social issues including adoption, foster care, infidelity, substance abuse, domestic abuse, immigration status, and transgenderism. Although media portrayals of family have evolved dramatically since the 1950s, our never-ending fascination with television families underscores the cultural importance of family dynamics and family boundaries.

There are a few reasons why *Rereading America* begins with this chapter on myths of family. First, we all know a lot about families from living in our own families, observing our communities, and consuming various media. We may not be licensed experts, but we are deeply knowledgeable. In addition, the notion of an ideal nuclear family is a perfect example of a cultural myth that held sway

for decades despite its dubious relation to real life. As you proceed through the chapter you can judge for yourself how much power that myth retains today. Finally, other key topics in *Rereading America* — notions about gender, race, and success, for example — are powerfully shaped by family life.

The myth of the idealized nuclear family is explored in the chapter's first reading selection, "Looking for Work," in which Gary Soto recalls his boyhood desire to transform his working-class Chicano family into a facsimile of the Cleavers on *Leave It to Beaver*. Stephanie Coontz, in "What We Really Miss About the 1950s," then takes a close analytical look at the 1950s family, explaining its lasting appeal to some Americans but also documenting its dark side. Together these selections describe and then reread a complex set of cultural assumptions.

The next few selections draw on sociology, public policy, law, and the visual arts to provide broader and more recent perspectives on the meanings of family. "The Color of Family Ties: Race, Class, Gender, and Extended Family Involvement," by Naomi Gerstel and Natalia Sarkisian, challenges common misconceptions by carefully examining how ethnicity and social class shape the behaviors of American families. The next reading — "When Should a Child Be Taken from His Parents?" — asks us to consider one of the most difficult and consequential decisions a society can make, the decision to break apart a family to guarantee the safety or even the survival of its children. The need to separate some parents from their children is in itself a troubling reality, but as author Larissa MacFarquhar reveals, such decisions about child welfare may also reflect racial or class bias. Next, midway through the chapter, the Visual Portfolio offers you a chance to practice interpreting images; the photographs in this collection suggest some of the complex ways the contemporary American family intersects with gender, ethnicity, and social class.

The chapter ends with three readings that explore twenty-first century challenges and opportunities for American families. First, Amy Ellis Nutt tells the story of how a family supports the transition of one of their identical twin boys, Wyatt, into a young transgender woman, Nicole. Next, in a selection from *Loving: Interracial Intimacy in America and the Threat to White Supremacy*, Sheryll Cashin explains why the growing number of interracial marriages may foster healthier race relations and serve as a powerful counterforce to white supremacism. The chapter concludes with a short reading by sociologist Mimi Schippers that questions our cultural assumption that a monogamous couple is the best or only foundation of family life.

Sources

- Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. Print.
 Mintz, Steven, and Susan Kellogg. *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Life*. New York: Free Press, 1988. Print.
 Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. 1835. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. Print.

BEFORE READING

- Spend ten minutes or so jotting down every word, phrase, or image you associate with the idea of "family." Write as freely as possible, without censoring your thoughts or worrying about grammatical correctness. Working

in small groups, compare lists and try to categorize your responses. What assumptions about families do they reveal?

- Draw a visual representation of your family. This could take the form of a graph, chart, diagram, map, cartoon, symbolic picture, or literal portrait. Don't worry if you're not a skillful artist: the main point is to convey an idea, and even stick figures can speak eloquently. When you're finished, write a journal entry about your drawing. Was it easier to depict some feelings or ideas visually than it would have been to describe them in words? Did you find some things about your family difficult or impossible to convey visually? Does your drawing "say" anything that surprises you?
- Write a journal entry about how you think attending college has changed, or will change, your relationship to your family.
- Study the frontispiece to this chapter on page 15 and discuss the way photographer Julie Mack has chosen to portray her family. Is this a "typical" family? How do you read the expressions of the people and the emotional tone of the image as a whole? Why is the family posing in their SUV, in their driveway, seemingly at dusk?

LOOKING FOR WORK

GARY SOTO

"Looking for Work" is the narrative of a nine-year-old Mexican American boy who wants his family to imitate the "perfect families" he sees on TV. Much of the humor in this essay comes from the author's perspective as an adult looking back at his childhood self, but Soto also respects the child's point of view. In the marvelous details of this midsummer day, Soto captures the interplay of seductive myth and complex reality. Gary Soto (b. 1952) grew up "on the industrial side of Fresno, right smack against a junkyard and the junkyard's cross-eyed German shepherd." Having discovered poetry almost by chance in a city college library, he has now published more than forty books of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction for children, young adults, and adults. He has also received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation, in addition to numerous other awards. His recent publications include *Meatballs for the People: Proverbs to Chew On* (2017) and *The Elements of San Joaquin* (2018).

ONE JULY, WHILE KILLING ANTS ON THE KITCHEN SINK with a rolled newspaper, I had a nine-year-old's vision of wealth that would save us from ourselves. For weeks I had drunk Kool-Aid and watched

morning reruns of *Father Knows Best*, whose family was so uncomplicated in its routine that I very much wanted to imitate it. The first step was to get my brother and sister to wear shoes at dinner.

"Come on, Rick—come on, Deb," I whined. But Rick mimicked me and the same day that I asked him to wear shoes he came to the dinner table in only his swim trunks. My mother didn't notice, nor did my sister, as we sat to eat our beans and tortillas in the stifling heat of our kitchen. We all gleamed like cellophane, wiping the sweat from our brows with the backs of our hands as we talked about the day: Frankie our neighbor was beat up by Faustino; the swimming pool at the playground would be closed for a day because the pump was broken.

Such was our life. So that morning, while doing-in the train of ants which arrived each day, I decided to become wealthy, and right away! After downing a bowl of cereal, I took a rake from the garage and started up the block to look for work.

We lived on an ordinary block of mostly working class people: warehousemen, egg candler,¹ welders, mechanics, and a union plumber. And there were many retired people who kept their lawns green and the gutters uncluttered of the chewing gum wrappers we dropped as we rode by on our bikes. They bent down to gather our litter, muttering at our evilness.

At the corner house I rapped the screen door and a very large woman in a muu-muu answered. She sized me up and then asked what I could do. 5

"Rake leaves," I answered smiling.

"It's summer, and there ain't no leaves," she countered. Her face was pinched with lines; fat jiggled under her chin. She pointed to the lawn, then the flower bed, and said: "You see any leaves there—or there?" I followed her pointing arm, stupidly. But she had a job for me and that was to get her a Coke at the liquor store. She gave me twenty cents, and after ditching my rake in a bush, off I ran. I returned with an unbagged Pepsi, for which she thanked me and gave me a nickel from her apron.

I skipped off her porch, fetched my rake, and crossed the street to the next block where Mrs. Moore, mother of Earl the retarded man, let me weed a flower bed. She handed me a trowel and for a good part of the morning my fingers dipped into the moist dirt, ripping up runners of Bermuda grass. Worms surfaced in my search for deep roots, and I cut them in halves, tossing them to Mrs. Moore's cat who pawed them playfully as they dried in the sun. I made out Earl whose face was pressed to the back window of the house, and although he was calling to me I couldn't understand what he was trying to say. Embarrassed, I worked without looking up, but I imagined his contorted mouth and the ring of keys attached to his belt—keys that jingled with each palsied step. He scared me and I worked quickly to finish the flower bed. When I did

¹egg candler: One who inspects eggs by holding them up to a light. [All notes are the editors'.]

finish Mrs. Moore gave me a quarter and two peaches from her tree, which I washed there but ate in the alley behind my house.

I was sucking on the second one, a bit of juice staining the front of my T-shirt, when Little John, my best friend, came walking down the alley with a baseball bat over his shoulder, knocking over trash cans as he made his way toward me.

Little John and I went to St. John's Catholic School, where we sat among the "stupids." Miss Marino, our teacher, alternated the rows of good students with the bad, hoping that by sitting side-by-side with the bright students the stupids might become more intelligent, as though intelligence were contagious. But we didn't progress as she had hoped. She grew frustrated when one day, while dismissing class for recess, Little John couldn't get up because his arms were stuck in the slats of the chair's backrest. She scolded us with a shaking finger when we knocked over the globe, denting the already troubled Africa. She muttered curses when Leroy White, a real stupid but a great softball player with the gift to hit to all fields, openly chewed his host² when he made his First Communion; his hands swung at his sides as he returned to the pew looking around with a big smile.

Little John asked what I was doing, and I told him that I was taking a break from work, as I sat comfortably among high weeds. He wanted to join me, but I reminded him that the last time he'd gone door-to-door asking for work his mother had whipped him. I was with him when his mother, a New Jersey Italian who could rise up in anger one moment and love the next, told me in a polite but matter-of-fact voice that I had to leave because she was going to beat her son. She gave me a home-made popsicle, ushered me to the door, and said that I could see Little John the next day. But it was sooner than that. I went around to his bedroom window to suck my popsicle and watch Little John dodge his mother's blows, a few hitting their mark but many whirring air.

It was midday when Little John and I converged in the alley, the sun blazing in the high nineties, and he suggested that we go to Roosevelt High School to swim. He needed five cents to make fifteen, the cost of admission, and I lent him a nickel. We ran home for my bike and when my sister found out that we were going swimming, she started to cry because she didn't have the fifteen cents but only an empty Coke bottle. I waved for her to come and three of us mounted the bike—Debra on the cross bar, Little John on the handle bars and holding the Coke bottle which we would cash for a nickel and make up the difference that would allow all of us to get in, and me pumping up the crooked streets, dodging cars and pot holes. We spent the day swimming under the afternoon sun, so that when we got home our mom asked us what was darker, the floor or us? She feigned a stern posture, her hands on her hips and her mouth puckered. We played along. Looking down, Debbie and I said in unison, "Us."

²his host: The wafer that embodies, in the Catholic sacrament of Communion, the bread of the Last Supper and the body of Christ.

That evening at dinner we all sat down in our bathing suits to eat our beans, laughing and chewing loudly. Our mom was in a good mood, so I took a risk and asked her if sometime we could have turtle soup. A few days before I had watched a television program in which a Polynesian tribe killed a large turtle, gutted it, and then stewed it over an open fire. The turtle, basted in a sugary sauce, looked delicious as I ate an afternoon bowl of cereal, but my sister, who was watching the program with a glass of Kool-Aid between her knees, said, "Caca."

My mother looked at me in bewilderment. "Boy, are you a crazy Mexican. Where did you get the idea that people eat turtles?"

"On television," I said, explaining the program. Then I took it a step further. "Mom, do you think we could get dressed up for dinner one of these days? David King does."

"Ay, Dios," my mother laughed. She started collecting the dinner plates, but my brother wouldn't let go of his. He was still drawing a picture in the bean sauce. Giggling, he said it was me, but I didn't want to listen because I wanted an answer from Mom. This was the summer when I spent the mornings in front of the television that showed the comfortable lives of white kids. There were no beatings, no rifts in the family. They wore bright clothes; toys tumbled from their closets. They hopped into bed with kisses and woke to glasses of fresh orange juice, and to a father sitting before his morning coffee while the mother buttered his toast. They hurried through the day making friends and gobs of money, returning home to a warmly lit living room, and then dinner. *Leave It to Beaver* was the program I replayed in my mind:

"May I have the mashed potatoes?" asks Beaver with a smile.

"Sure, Beav," replies Wally as he taps the corners of his mouth with a starched napkin.

The father looks on in his suit. The mother, decked out in earrings and a pearl necklace, cuts into her steak and blushes. Their conversation is politely clipped.

"Swell," says Beaver, his cheeks puffed with food.

Our own talk at dinner was loud with belly laughs and marked by our pointing forks at one another. The subjects were commonplace.

"Gary, let's go to the ditch tomorrow," my brother suggests. He explains that he has made a life preserver out of four empty detergent bottles strung together with twine and that he will make me one if I can find more bottles. "No way are we going to drown."

"Yeah, then we could have a dirt clod fight," I reply, so happy to be alive.

Whereas the Beaver's family enjoyed dessert in dishes at the table, our mom sent us outside, and more often than not I went into the alley to peek over the neighbor's fences and spy out fruit, apricots or peaches.

I had asked my mom and again she laughed that I was a crazy *chavalo*³ as she stood in front of the sink, her arms rising and falling

³chavalo: Kid.

with suds, face glistening from the heat. She sent me outside where my brother and sister were sitting in the shade that the fence threw out like a blanket. They were talking about me when I plopped down next to them. They looked at one another and then Debbie, my eight-year-old sister, started in.

"What's this crap about getting dressed up?"

She had entered her *profanity* stage. A year later she would give up such words and slip into her Catholic uniform, and into squealing on my brother and me when we "cussed this" and "cussed that."

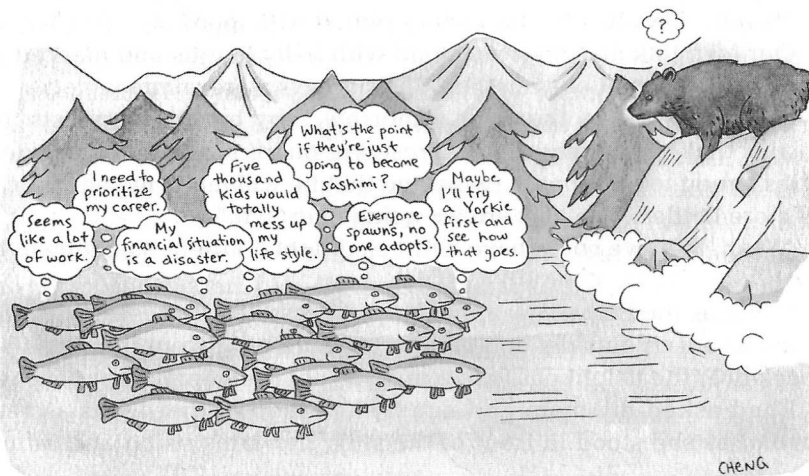
I tried to convince them that if we improved the way we looked we might get along better in life. White people would like us more. They might invite us to places, like their homes or front yards. They might not hate us so much.

My sister called me a "craphead," and got up to leave with a stalk of grass dangling from her mouth. "They'll never like us."

My brother's mood lightened as he talked about the ditch—the white water, the broken pieces of glass, and the rusted car fenders that awaited our knees. There would be toads, and rocks to smash them.

David King, the only person we knew who resembled the middle class, called from over the fence. David was Catholic, of Armenian and French descent, and his closet was filled with toys. A bear-shaped cookie jar, like the ones on television, sat on the kitchen counter. His mother was remarkably kind while she put up with the racket we made on the street. Evenings, she often watered the front yard and it must have upset her to see us—my brother and I and others—jump

FUTURE SALMON



from trees laughing, the unkillable kids of the very poor, who got up unshaken, brushed off, and climbed into another one to try again.

David called again. Rick got up and slapped grass from his pants. When I asked if I could come along he said no. David said no. They were two years older so their affairs were different from mine. They greeted one another with foul names and took off down the alley to look for trouble.

I went inside the house, turned on the television, and was about to sit down with a glass of Kool-Aid when Mom shooed me outside.

"It's still light," she said. "Later you'll bug me to let you stay out longer. So go on."

I downed my Kool-Aid and went outside to the front yard. No one was around. The day had cooled and a breeze rustled the trees. Mr. Jackson, the plumber, was watering his lawn and when he saw me he turned away to wash off his front steps. There was more than an hour of light left, so I took advantage of it and decided to look for work. I felt suddenly alive as I skipped down the block in search of an overgrown flower bed and the dime that would end the day right.

ENGAGING THE TEXT

1. Why is the narrator attracted to the kind of family life depicted on TV? What, if anything, does he think is wrong with his life? Why do his desires apparently have so little impact on his family?
2. Why does the narrator first go looking for work? How has the meaning of work changed by the end of the story, when he goes out again "in search of an overgrown flower bed and the dime that would end the day right"? Explain.
3. As Soto looks back on his nine-year-old self, he has a different perspective on things than he had as a child. How would you characterize the mature Soto's thoughts about his childhood family life? (Was it "a good family"? What was wrong with Soto's thinking as a nine-year-old?) Back up your remarks with specific references to the narrative.
4. Review the story to find each mention of food or drink. Explain the role these references play.
5. Review the cast of "supporting characters" in this narrative — the mother, sister, brother, friends, and neighbors. What does each contribute to the story and in particular to the meaning of family within the story?

EXPLORING CONNECTIONS

6. Look ahead to the excerpt from *Becoming Nicole: The Transformation of an American Family* (p. 73). Compare Soto's family to the Maines family, being sure to consider ethnicity, gender roles, levels of affluence, and the different

lack of father