

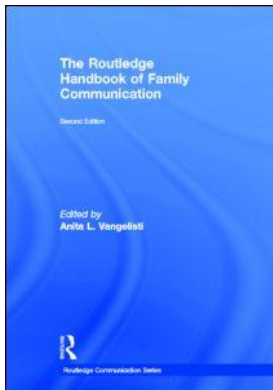
This article was downloaded by: 10.2.97.136

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Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Handbook of Family Communication

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Single, No Children

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203848166.ch12>

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Published online on: 01 Nov 2012

How to cite :- Bella DePaulo. 01 Nov 2012, *Single, No Children from: The Routledge Handbook of Family Communication* Routledge

Accessed on: 03 Oct 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203848166.ch12>

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Single, No Children

Who Is Your Family?

Bella DePaulo

After his election in 2008, President Barack Obama nominated a single woman with no children, Janet Napolitano, to be the Secretary of Homeland Security. Commenting on Napolitano's qualifications, Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell declared her to be "perfect"—"because for that job, you have to have no life. Janet has no family. Perfect. She can devote, literally, 19–20 hours a day to it" (Collins, 2008).

About a year into her time as Homeland Security Director, Napolitano was called early in the morning when a passenger on a flight headed to Detroit, Michigan, turned out to have a bomb concealed in his underwear. It was Christmas Day, 2009, and the director was at the home of her brother (Kornblut, 2010).

Yet neither Napolitano's brother nor her sister seem to come to mind when people such as Ed Rendell think about Janet Napolitano's life. There are shorthand words and phrases used to refer to single people with no children—they are "alone," they "don't have anyone" (DePaulo, 2006). Those ways of thinking and speaking render invisible all of the important people in the lives of singles with no children, including their family and their friends (DePaulo, 2011b).

In this chapter, I will draw from the available research literature to show that single people with no children have families and do family-type things. They have personal communities that typically include friends and relatives. They have "social convoys" that provide shared experiences, continuity, and a sense of identity. Singles with no children are in some ways even more interconnected with other people such as friends, siblings, parents, and neighbors than are individuals who are married. Perceptions of who counts as family have not kept up with the realities of how people actually live their lives. As I will document in the next section, the number of single people, and of adults with no children, has been climbing for decades, so perhaps our understandings of those demographic juggernauts will soon begin to catch up.

Adults Who Are Not Married and Adults with No Children: Two Demographic Groups on the Rise

In 1970, 37.5 million Americans, 18 and older, were unmarried—they were divorced or widowed or had always been single. They comprised 28.3 percent of the population

(Saluter & Lugaila, 1998). Their numbers have grown steadily. The 2009 data from the American Community Survey reported 106.4 million unmarried Americans—45.8 percent of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Of the 106.4 Americans who were not married in 2009, 65.4 million of them had never been married.

As more Americans are living single, so, too are more Americans—both unmarried and married—living with no children. A Pew Research Center report (Livingston & Cohn, 2010) compared the number of women, ages 40 to 44, who had never had children in 1976 and 2008. In 1976, only 580,000 women in that age range, or 10 percent, had never given birth. By 2008, the number jumped to 1.9 million, or 18 percent. Adding births after age 44, as well as nonbiological children, would increase the number of women with children at both points in time, but would not change the historical trend toward not having any children at all. The same Pew report found that the percentage of women who had never had children was especially high for those who had always been single—56 percent, compared to 13 percent among those who were currently or previously married, for the 2008 data.

Although much of the research I will describe focuses on Americans and does not report separate results for different racial or ethnic groups, the key demographic changes are widespread. For example, the trend toward having no children is characteristic of Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians, as well as White Americans (Livingston & Cohn, 2010). One of the many demographic shifts contributing to the growing number of single people is the rising age at which people first marry, among those who do marry. United Nations data from 128 countries indicate that this is a global phenomenon (United Nations, 2009). It is strongest, to be sure, in countries classified as “developed,” but it is also evident in many “developing” countries.

Conceptualizing Family in the Lives of Singles with No Children

If you are single with no children, who is your family? In the next several sections, I will approach that question from a variety of perspectives. The meaning of family of origin is straightforward, so I will begin there. Then I will ask whether there are defining attributes of family. Next, I will discuss the performative perspective, known as “doing” family, and I will ask whether singles with no children do family-type things. Another approach is to set aside the family terminology, and simply ask adults to name and describe the important people in their lives. Perhaps family is whoever people say it is; I’ll consider that, too. Finally, I’ll review what nonprofessionals say when asked who counts as family.

Families of Origin

In 2007, the *Journal of Family Issues* devoted the October and November issues to research and theory about people who have no children. In their introduction to the special issues, Pearl Dykstra and Gunhild Hagestad (2007) said:

It is common to hear young adults being asked, “Do you have a family?” and responding, “not yet.” Seldom does the person who posed the question follow up with the query, “So you have no parents, no brothers and sisters, no aunts and uncles, and no cousins?” We tend to disregard the fact that everyone is someone’s child, and the parent–child ties from the family of orientation may last for more than 60 years!

(p. 1281)

Family of origin. That's the first answer to the question, "Single, no children: Who's your family?" Later in this chapter, I will address the question of just how much contact singles maintain with their parents and siblings, compared to married people.

Are There Defining Criteria for "Family"?

When people in contemporary American society ask other adults about their families, they do not expect to hear about families of origin. What they are really asking is whether the adult stands at the helm of a nuclear family. In white middle-class America of the 1950s, a unit comprised of a married mother and father and their minor children was the dominant household form. Now, however, there are fewer households comprised of mom, dad, and the kids, than of single people living solo (Klinenberg, 2012).

In the 1950s, few scholars saw that coming. As Scanzoni (2001) noted:

The accepted wisdom was that the post-World War II nuclear family style was the culmination of a long journey—the end point of changes in families that had been occurring for several hundred years. Accordingly, that style was commonly regarded as the standard—the gauge against which all other forms of families were measured and found wanting.

(p. 688)

There was a name that the sociologist Talcott Parsons (1965) gave to the nuclear family form: "the normal American family." Dorothy Smith (1993) used the term "Standard North American Family" (SNAF), but she saw the construct as ideological rather than descriptive. Here is her definition of SNAF:

It is a conception of the family as a legally married couple sharing a household. The adult male is in paid employment; his earnings provide the economic basis of the family-household. The adult female may also earn an income, but her primary responsibility is to the care of husband, household, and children. Adult male and female may be parents (in whatever legal sense) of children also resident in the household.

(p. 52)

The expectation that the husband will work and the wife will primarily take care of him, the kids, and the home has diminished over time. Still, other components of this conceptualization of family still dominate popular definitions. The U.S. Census Bureau, for example, defines family as "*a group of two people or more (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together.*" (The householder is the person "in whose name the housing unit is owned or rented.")

The Census Bureau definition counts as family more than just the "married with children" groups. A group of just two people can be included—a married couple, for instance, or one parent and a child. Unmarried couples, though, would not count. If the Census Bureau had used the word "blood" instead of "birth," then two siblings living together would count as family, but since the key term is "birth," the sibs are excluded. There is no room in this definition of family for single adults with no children.

Twenty-first-century scholars are not so narrow in their views of who counts as family. An unmarried, cohabiting conjugal couple is sometimes regarded as family, even

if the couple is comprised of two men or two women. Adding children strengthens their claim to family status but not having children does not disqualify them.

Even the criterion of sharing a household is not as defining as it once was. In divorced and single-parent families, one parent sometimes lives in a different household than a child, but the parent and the child still consider one another to be family. Growing numbers of couples have commuter marriages or “live apart together” (Levin, 2004), either because they want their separate household spaces, or because obstacles such as far-flung jobs keep them apart. Members of transnational immigrant families live not just in different households but in different countries. Still, they are family.

So far, here are the criteria for family that are unnecessary, at least according to some important formulations. First, a family does not need to include children. Second, a family does not need to include two adults (single-parent families count). Third, when there are two adults in a family, they do not need to be married (cohabiting couples count). Fourth, the two adults do not need to consist of a man and a woman (two women count, as do two men). Fifth, a family does not need to include two adults in a conjugal relationship. Finally, the family members do not need to live under the same roof.

“Doing” Family: What Do Families Do?

An entirely different approach to defining family sets aside structural considerations and instead asks what families do. Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan (2001), for example, suggested that “it is less important whether we are *in* a family than whether we *do* family-type things ... We live family rather than dwell within it” (p. 38).

There is no one set of functions of family that scholars have agreed upon as definitive. The ones I will describe below have been culled from a variety of writings. The claim that families perform certain functions is sometimes more of an ideal or an aspiration than a reality. The functions may also be regarded as possibilities—people can tap into their families for these purposes when they need to, but they do not necessarily engage with their families in all of these ways in their everyday lives.

When families are defined by whether they do family-like things, then many people more commonly regarded as friends become redefined as family. In a later section, I will make the case that we should not completely merge our notions of friends and family, as the two contribute in distinct ways to our lives.

Care for Those Who Cannot Care for Themselves

A nationally representative sample of British adults answered the question, “Do you currently or have you ever regularly looked after someone, for at least three months, who is sick, disabled or elderly?” The author (Henz, 2006) reported results separately for marital status and parental status. Both single men and single women were more likely to have provided such care than were married men or women. Parental status did not matter for men unless they had a child younger than seven years old—those men were less likely to care for the sick, disabled, or elderly than were men who had no children. For women, those who had two or more children were less likely to provide care than women with no children or just one child.

Results from a nationally representative sample of Americans (Heymann, 2000) were reported only according to parental status. Participants kept a diary every day for a week of their experiences as workers and caregivers. On the key measures of cutting back on

paid employment in order to care for others, Heymann found that adults with no children took cutbacks for children such as nieces and nephews. In fact, they were just as likely to take time off to care for those categories of children as were adults with their own children under the age of 18. Adults with no children were more than three times as likely to take time off from work to care for parents. Participants also reported cutting back on work hours to care for adults who were not their parents; 46 percent of adults without children did so, compared to just 13 percent of adults with minor children.

In short, single people and adults with no children are doing at least their fair share—and sometimes more—of caring for people who cannot care for themselves. Qualitative research supports that conclusion, too (e.g., Simpson, 2003). Of course, adults with no children take no time off to care for their own children since they do not have any, but they are just as likely as parents to cut back on work hours to care for other children such as nieces and nephews.

Socialize the Young

In his book on aunts and uncles as the forgotten kin, Milardo (2010) notes that singles with no children are among those most actively involved as aunts and uncles. Others, too, have observed that single adults are often closer to their nieces and nephews than are married adults (e.g., Connidis, 2001; Rubinstein, Alexander, Goodman, & Luborsky, 1991).

McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992) took a different approach to evaluating the roles of different categories of adults in socializing children. Drawing from Erik Erikson's notion of generativity, a concern with "establishing and guiding the next generation," the authors developed a scale to measure that concern. It included items such as, "I try to pass along the knowledge that I have gained through my experiences" and "I have a responsibility to improve the neighborhood in which I live."

Married people scored no higher on the generativity scale than single people did. Parental status made little difference for women. Only among men did parents score higher than adults with no children.

On this criterion of doing family-type things, as on the previous one, single people clearly qualify. They are often important figures in the lives of relatives such as nieces and nephews. In formal roles as teachers, counselors, and more, and in their informal interactions, single men and single women, including single women with no children, are just as concerned and involved with guiding the next generation as married people are.

Share Experiences and Create a Sense of Continuity and Identity

Single people with no children have shared experiences and a sense of continuity and identity with their families of origin, both nuclear and extended. Parents, siblings, grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews all have the potential to contribute to the sense of rootedness that can be central to the experience of family.

A sense of an interpersonal history does not come from a natal family alone. Life-span scholars, such as Antonucci and her colleagues (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1995; Kahn & Antonucci, 1980), have shown that people have "social convoys"—networks of people who provide continuity over the course of a lifetime. The convoys are not static; particular people, or categories of people such as friends and family members, can become more or less important over time, or even fall out of the inner circles of a person's life. Still, there is enough constancy amidst the change to provide an enduring sense of continuity and identity.

Exchange Emotional, Practical, and Material Support

“Doing” family is not just a matter of being there—or having someone there for you—in times of dependency or crisis. The family experience, at least in its ideal form, also includes routine exchanges of interest in one another’s lives and help with even the small challenges of everyday life. In this section, I’ll first review the place of siblings in the lives of singles with no children. Then I’ll assess singles’ exchanges with their parents. Finally, I’ll evaluate the role in singles’ lives of friends, neighbors, and community members.

Siblings. Some of the best data on American sibling relationships come from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), a national sample of Americans 19 and older who were interviewed in 1987–88 and again in 1992–94. Participants were asked about their contacts with their siblings, including visits, phone calls, and written communications. (The surveys took place before the ubiquity of cell phones and email.) They answered questions about giving and receiving help with transportation, repairs, chores, advice, and child care. They also indicated how close they were with their siblings and how well they got along.

Data from the first wave of interviews (1987–88) were reported by Spitze and Trent (2006), who focused on adults from two-child families. They found that “siblings are central to the lives of adults; most sibling relationships involve frequent contact and positive feelings” (p. 977). On the average, siblings visited one another three times a month, and also phoned or wrote three times a month—except when the sibs were sisters, who averaged five calls or letters per month. More than 75 percent of the men said they got along with their sibling, and more than 80 percent of the women said that they did.

The siblings who were single (defined as having no spouse or partner) did more to maintain ties with their siblings than those who were married. (Singles are more likely to live with a sibling [Gerstel & Sarkisian, 2006; Wenger et al., 2007], but the authors excluded from their analyses those singles who were sharing a household.) The single participants visited their sibling more often, called more often, and wrote more often. They also tended to participate more frequently in helping exchanges, but only a few of those effects were significant. Whether or not a person had children made almost no difference in the extent to which the siblings gave or received help. What mattered more to those exchanges was living close to the sibling.

Gerstel and Sarkisian (2006) reported results from the 1992–94 wave of data. They looked more closely at marital status, adding the category of previously married to the analyses. Again, they found that the participants who had always been single were more likely than the currently married participants to visit their siblings and to call and write them. The previously married maintained levels of contact that were in between the single and the currently married. The adults who had always been single also provided more emotional support and practical assistance to their siblings than either the currently married or the previously married participants did.

The findings from each of the individual waves of data are suggestive, but fall short of answering the question of whether married people are less involved with their siblings *because* they are married, or whether the results can be explained in some other way. Short of randomly assigning people to stay single or get married or divorced, the best approach is to follow the same people over time to see whether they become more or less connected with their siblings as their marital status changes. That’s what White (2001) did, in her analyses of the changes in contact between the first and second waves of the NSFH data collection. She found that people who got married had significantly

less contact with their siblings than they had when they were single, and that people whose marriages dissolved had significantly more contact with their siblings than they did when they were married. Whether the participants had children did not seem to matter.

White (2001) also reported on the overall trajectory of sibling relationships in adulthood. During the early adult years, siblings become somewhat more geographically distant from one another, and their contacts decrease modestly as well. These measures of connection stabilize when adults reach their 30s and remain consistent throughout later life. Giving and receiving help from siblings generally decreases over the course of the adult years, but then increases after the age of 70 for people with siblings nearby. When marital status is considered, the involvement with siblings is greater for those who are single—especially those who have always been single.

Parents. Similar to the results for sibling ties, research on relationships with parents also shows that single people are at least as likely—and sometimes more likely—to invest time and effort in their intergenerational relationships. In a study of more than 1,900 young adults (ages 18 to 34) from the Netherlands, for instance (Bucx, van Wel, Knijn, & Hagendoorn, 2008), singles had more face-to-face contact with their parents than married or cohabiting people did. There were no differences by marital or relationship status in the frequency of telephone or email contacts.

Drawing from several national samples of Americans, Gerstel and Sarkisian (2007) also found greater intergenerational support and connection for singles than married people. In fact, single people exchanged more help with just their own parents than married people exchanged with their parents and parents-in-law combined.

Friends, neighbors, and community. Data from the NSFH are again relevant to the question of whether single adults maintain more active contacts and more mutually supportive relationships with friends and neighbors than married people do.

Gerstel and Sarkisian (2006) reported the results from that survey, along with another national sample from the 2004 wave of data of the General Social Survey. Consistent with the results for connections with siblings and parents, the findings from the two surveys showed that singles are more likely to socialize with friends and neighbors than are currently married people, with the previously married in between. Adults who had always been single were also more likely than the currently married or previously married to exchange emotional support and practical assistance with friends and neighbors.

The Wisconsin Longitudinal Study has followed thousands of students who graduated from Wisconsin high schools in 1957. As adults in their 50s and 60s, the participants were twice asked whether they had given each of various kinds of help to each of various categories of people over the past month (Kahn, McGill, & Bianchi, 2011). (Marital status categories were not analyzed separately by parental status.) Across all kinds of help to friends, neighbors, and coworkers, a greater percentage of the always-single men and women provided help than the previously married, the currently married in their first marriages, or the currently married in their second (or later) marriages. In fact, it was the currently married in their first marriage who always provided the lowest rates of helping to nonkin. The kinds of help that the always-single adults were more likely than adults of other marital statuses to provide to friends, neighbors, and coworkers included transportation, errands, and shopping; housework, yard work, repairs, or other work around the house; and advice, encouragement, or moral or emotional support.

There are other studies of the place of friends in the lives of singles, though these investigations did not specifically assess different kinds of exchanges. The importance of friends to women who have always been single was documented several decades ago in

Simon's (1987) study of 50 ever-single American women, ages 65 to 105, who were born near the turn of the 20th century. Simon found that only one of the 50 women was socially isolated. The other 49 had a total of 47 friends they were in touch with daily, and 98 more they connected with once or twice a week. A more recent study of a random sample of older American women (Carr, 2008) showed that those who had always been single and those who were previously married spent more time with friends than did the currently married women.

Friends are also important to single men and women younger than 65. Surveying a nationally representative sample of nearly 3,000 adults from the Netherlands, Kalmijn (2003) asked participants to name up to five of their best friends, not counting children or conjugal partners. The hypothesis was that across the life course, the number of friends would decrease. The study, though, was cross-sectional. Singles were compared with various groups such as people who were cohabiting or married without children, couples who did have children, and empty-nesters. The role of friends did in fact diminish across the various categories. Singles, for example, reported an average of four close friends, whereas empty-nesters reported about three. The number of monthly contacts decreased, too, from about 13 or 14 for the singles to about five or six for the empty-nesters.

In a study of more than 10,000 Australian women, ages 73–78 (Cwikel, Gramotnev, & Lee, 2006), the authors set out to learn whether the women who had always been single and had no children would be particularly disadvantaged in later life. For example, would they be socially isolated? Quite the contrary. Compared to married or previously married women, with or without children, the always-single women with no children were especially likely to provide volunteer services. They were also active participants in social groups.

Who Are the Important People in the Lives of Singles with No Children?

Another approach to the study of family in the lives of singles with no children is to set aside the use of “family” terminology and the quest for evidence of the kinds of functions that families are believed to serve and instead answer this question: “Who are the important people in the lives of singles with no children?” One methodology involves showing people a set of concentric circles, and asking them to locate the most important people in the innermost circle, and the next most important people in the other circles (e.g., Fiori, Antonucci, & Cortina, 2006; Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Wenger, Dykstra, Melkas, & Knipscheer, 2007). Another is to ask particular questions that seem especially significant—for instance, “Is there a person with whom you can really share your private feelings and concerns?” and “Looking back over the last six months, who are the people with whom you discussed matters that are important to you?” (Hampton, Sessions, & Ja Her, 2011; Marks, 1996). These are similar to some of the questions about the exchange of emotional support reviewed in the section on family functions (above), except that they focus specifically on particularly personal or consequential matters. Still other researchers (e.g., Roseneil, 2004) conduct in-depth interviews to learn about the people who matter most to their interviewees.

When they were 53 or 54 years old, more than 6,000 people from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study were asked about their kin and nonkin confidants (Marks, 1996). The kin (nonkin) questions were: “Is there a person in your family (friend outside your family) with whom you can really share your private feelings and concerns?” Married

people—who could name their spouse in response to the question about family members—named more kin confidants than did the people who had always been single. However, the always-single men and women (taken together) named nonsignificantly more nonkin confidants than the currently married people did, and the always-single women named significantly more nonkin confidants than the currently married women did.

In 2008, a national sample of 2,512 American adults was asked, “Looking back over the last six months, who are the people with whom you discussed matters that are important to you?” (Hampton, Sessions, & Ja Her, 2011). The total number of confidants did not differ between those who were married or living with a partner and everyone else. However, the single participants were significantly more likely than the married or cohabiting people to name at least one nonkin confidant.

Results were not reported separately for singles with no children in either of the two studies of confidants (Hampton et al., 2011; Marks, 1996). However, parental status was considered, and in neither study did it predict the total number of confidants or the number of kin or nonkin confidants.

The most comprehensive study of the interpersonal ties of single people with no children was based on data from adults 65 and older from nine nations: Australia, Finland, Germany, Israel, Japan, the Netherlands, Spain, the U.K. and the U.S. (Wenger et al., 2007). For six of those countries (Australia, Finland, the Netherlands, Spain, the U.K. and the U.S.), the authors were able to map out the social networks of singles with no children, to see if they were the sorts of restricted networks that might leave them vulnerable in later life.

The two most limited network types they documented were the *local self-contained* and *private restricted* support networks. The local self-contained network describes a home-centered lifestyle, with the individual reaching out to neighbors when necessary. The private restricted network is typical of married couples who have little local support. Among those who do have kin nearby, some have *local family dependent* networks, in which they rely on those relatives for help when they need it. The last two types of support networks include friends as important sources of support. In the *locally integrated* networks, there are kin nearby, and the individual relies on them as well as friends and neighbors for support. People with locally integrated networks also tend to be involved in local community groups. Finally, in the *wider community focused* support networks, individuals do not have kin nearby, but they maintain contact with the kin they do have. Their friends and local voluntary groups are their key sources of everyday support.

With five kinds of support networks, six countries, and 12 marital/parental combinations to consider (men without children, women without children, mothers, and fathers, each subcategorized as always-single, previously married, or currently married), the results were complex. Still, certain patterns were discernible across the countries, except for Australia. Adults with no children tended to have the most restricted networks—either local self-contained or private restricted. Women who had always been single and had no children were a big exception. These women often had the kinds of support networks in which friends were important—either locally integrated networks (in which local kin and neighbors were also important) or wider community focused networks (in which women without any local kin maintained ties with friends and local voluntary groups). Australia is the exception in that both the men and the women who had always been single were likely to have local self-contained networks, and among the other marital/parental status groups, the wider community focused network was more commonplace than it was in other countries.

A more intensive qualitative approach to the study of the social embeddedness of people living outside of marriage and nuclear family was pursued by Roseneil and Budgeon (2004). Their focus was on people not living with a conjugal partner. They interviewed 53 people, ages 25 through 60, for as long as 2.5 hours each. The participants came from three different kinds of localities in the U.K.: a conventional small town, an unconventional small town, and a multi-ethnic inner city. Results showed that “far from being socially isolated, solitary individuals who flit from one unfulfilling relationship to another, most of the people we interviewed were enmeshed in complex networks of intimacy and care, and had strong commitments and connections to others ... very few showed any yearning to be part of a conventional couple or family. Of those with partners, almost all had chosen not to live together” (Roseneil, 2004, p. 413).

Getting to Choose: Is Family Whoever You Say It Is?

In the past several sections, I’ve taken indirect approaches to the question of who counts as family. I described some of the functions most often attributed to families, and asked whether they apply to the lives of singles with no children. I also reviewed studies in which participants were asked, in different ways, to name the people who are important to them.

But what about a more direct approach? Why not simply ask people, “Who is your family,” and let them decide who qualifies?

In her influential book, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*, Weston (1991) documented ways in which gays and lesbians created families of their own, sometimes in the context of being rejected by their families of origin after coming out as lesbian or gay. “Rather than being organized through marriage and child rearing,” Weston noted, “most chosen families are characterized by fluid boundaries, eclectic composition, and relatively little symbolic differentiation between erotic and nonerotic ties” (p. 206).

A decade later, Weeks et al. (2001) continued the study of what they called “families of choice and other life experiments.” They described those families as “flexible, informal and varied, but strong and supportive networks of friends and lovers, often including members of families of origin. They provide the framework for the development of mutual care, responsibility and commitment” (p. 4). Families of choice can include people of different ages, including children; biological kin as well as friends, lovers, and ex-lovers; and they can reach across several households. People who had romantic partners, as well as those who did not, described people they regarded as their families.

Families of choice, Weston (1991) notes, are not just “substitutes” for families of origin. Many lesbians and gays who experienced no ostracism from their families of origin still created families of choice. Not all of the people she interviewed, though, used the language of family to refer to the important people in their lives; some lesbians and gays used the word “family” only in the more conventional ways.

In the Eyes of Others: Who Counts as Family?

So far, I have asked who counts as family according to scholars and official organizations (such as the Census Bureau) and I have also reviewed individual people’s responses to the question of who they count as family in their own lives. Still missing is the point of view that is often particularly significant in everyday life—what everyone else believes. What is the conventional wisdom of our time?

In 2010, the Pew Research Center released a report titled, “The decline of marriage and rise of new families” (Taylor, 2010). It begins with this overview:

Over the past 50 years, a quiet revolution has taken place in this country. Decades of demographic, economic, and social change have transformed the structure and composition of the American family. The pre-eminent family of the mid 20th century—mom, dad, and the kids—no longer has the stage to itself. A variety of new arrangements have emerged, giving rise to a broader and evolving definition of what constitutes a family.

(p. 1)

Among the many questions the Pew researchers asked the national sample of 2,691 American adults was, “What is a family?” Participants did not provide their own answers. Instead, they were read a list of possibilities, and were asked whether they considered each one a family. Every arrangement they asked about that included either a married couple or children was viewed as a family by more than half of the participants. Those arrangements were *married couple with children* (viewed as a family by 99 percent), *married couple without children* (90 percent), *single parent with children* (88 percent), *unmarried couple with children* (80 percent), and *same-sex couple with children* (63 percent). The two arrangements viewed as family by fewer than half of the participants were *same-sex couple without children* (45 percent) and *unmarried couple without children* (43 percent).

The fact that so many different arrangements counted as family to so many Americans was cited as evidence for the report’s opening claim that the definition of family is evolving and becoming broader. That’s an important point. But notice what is missing from the list of arrangements that participants were asked about. No one was asked whether a pair of siblings living together for decades, whose lives were as interdependent as a married couple’s in every way except for the sex, counted as family. No one was asked whether a household of people who *chose* to live together, in an arrangement not considered as temporary, counted as family, regardless of the number of people, their ages, or their marital or parental statuses. No one was asked whether a single person living solo, when considered along with the convoy of people who have been part of that person’s life for years or even decades, qualifies as family.

Participants in the Pew survey were also given an opportunity to be judgmental. For each of seven increasing trends, they were asked whether the trend was a bad thing for society, a good thing, or if it doesn’t make much difference. Only 29 percent said that the *increasing number of women not ever having children* was a bad thing. The only trend that fewer people disparaged as a bad thing was the *increase in people of different races marrying each other* (14 percent). Just one of the seven trends was deemed bad for society by more than half of the participants: 69 percent described the *increase in the number of single women having children* that way. (The other trends and their “bad thing” percentages were *people living together without being married*, 43; *unmarried couples raising children*, 43; *gay/lesbian couples raising children*, 43, and *mothers of young children working outside the home*, 37.) Missing from the list of growing trends that participants were asked about were the increase in the number of single people and the increase in the number of people living solo.

The unmarried participants in the Pew survey were less likely than the married ones to say that the increases in the various family forms were bad for society. They were also more open-minded when asked which particular arrangements counted as family.

Perhaps even more indicative of future trends, the youngest participants were the least likely to believe that the growing variety of family types was bad for society.

Reconsidering: Should We Really Count Friends as Family?

The research I've reviewed affirms the importance of friendship in people's lives, perhaps particularly in the lives of singles with no children. When people claim friends as family, they may be doing something that Western societies too often fail to do—acknowledging the significance of friends. "Family" sometimes has such a sentimentalized, and even revered, status that including friends under that protective umbrella may seem like a gracious and honorable thing to do.

Yet friends are not the same as family, and they are not the same as a conjugal partner. Ideally, a friend does not presume to be "The One" or "the one and only" emotionally significant person in your life. Friends are not supposed to be greedy that way—they usually expect to be part of a network that will probably include other friends.

When we refer to our friends as family, we risk marginalizing friendship by making it less salient. That's just one of the unintended consequences. Trimberger (2005) described some of the others:

Using family terms for nonkin relationships, however, reinforces the invisibility of care provided by friendship networks and contributes to the insecurity that those with weak family ties feel. We obscure the manner in which a network of friends can provide care without taxing individual friends or family members ... The strength of friendship networks—and their ability to promote community—rests on their separateness from family and cohabitation.

(p. 249)

Hertz and Ferguson (1997) made similar points in their discussion on the strengths of the networks of single mothers:

By parceling out these various aspects (the physical work, the caring work, the emotional work, etc.) across a wide network of people, these mothers spread the "risk" of losing a key player (like a husband) as well as safeguarding against anyone feeling overtaxed or burned out.

(p. 206)

Often the power of friendship inheres in the fact that we are not limited to just one friend. Some potentially important contributions to the research literature are compromised by the failure to appreciate that. For example, Pahl and Pevalin (2005) wanted to know about the relative significance of friends compared to kin (not including a spouse) across the life course. But they asked participants to name only the one person "you can best share your private feelings and concerns with" (p. 440). They found that single people were more likely than married people to name a friend, and that the older participants were more inclined than the younger ones to name a relative. Those results are important, but cannot tell us what we need to know about the actual place of friendship in our lives. The kinds of studies in which people are invited to map out the relative closeness of all of the important people in their lives are better suited for showing where friends really do stand, compared to everyone else.

Another important way that friendship differs from family is in the sense of obligation linked with the two relationship types. Family members, by prevailing norms, more often feel obligated to help when help is needed. Of course, that doesn't mean that they will always provide such help. Friendship, in contrast, is not a relationship defined by feelings of obligation. Western friendships typically exist because two people like each other and enjoy each other's company. Rarely are people friends only grudgingly, because they think they "should" be. In his poem, "Death of the hired man," Robert Frost said, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, They have to take you in." Perhaps friendship is the place where, when you want to go there, they *want* to take you in.

Research is likely to be misleading when it does not recognize the different roles of obligation and liking in our relationships with family and friends. In the Pew study of the rise of new families (Taylor, 2010), for instance, participants were asked, "Suppose someone you know had a serious problem and needed either financial help or caregiving. How obligated would you feel to provide assistance if that person were your —," with the blank filled in with nine different categories of people. The percent who said they would feel "very obligated" to help (rather than somewhat obligated, not too obligated, or not obligated) was lowest for the category of *best friend* (39 percent). (The other categories, and percentages who felt obligated, were: *parent*, 83; *grown child*, 77; *grandparent*, 67; *brother or sister*, 64; *spouse or partner's parent*, 62; *grown stepchild*, 60; *stepparent*, 55; and *step or half sibling*, 43.)

The Pew report claimed that the relative rankings of obligation were "evidence of the value that people place on relationships" (p. 45). But obligation is the wrong metric for assessing the value of friendships. It may not even be the best predictor of whether people really will provide help, though that remains to be determined.

A Look Toward the Future

For decades, Western societies have been changing in ways that are bringing single adults and adults with no children to the forefront. Yet there is little consideration of what family means to singles with no children (DePaulo, 2011a). When participants in national surveys (such as the Pew surveys) are asked whether various sets of people count as family, the kinds of living arrangements relevant to singles with no children are not even represented.

That is likely to change. Scholars such as Barry Wellman who have studied changes in social networks over time and around the globe argue that "in some societies, there may be a turn away from the household to the individual as the basic personal networking unit" (Wellman, 2007). The phenomenon is called "networked individualism." Although singles living solo are especially likely to fit that description, others qualify too. To quote Wellman (2007) again, "The emerging picture is of 'networked individuals' operating somewhat autonomously out of 'networked households' (Wellman, 2001; Kennedy and Wellman, 2007)." Even in contemporary nuclear families, experiences are not shared as much as they once were. Instead, individual family members sit in front of their own computers surfing their own favorite sites, watching their own preferred shows, and communicating with their own friends. There are individual cell phones rather than a family phone, and individual cars in families who can afford them. For married couples, the evidence is not just anecdotal. A study comparing couples in the year 2000 to those from 20 years previously showed that the couples from 2000 were less likely than the ones from 1980 to work on projects around the house together, go

out together, visit friends together, or even to eat together (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007).

In the opening years of the 21st century, we are still accustomed to asking people about their families. Maybe in the decades to come, it will not be just the phone companies who instead ask, “Who’s in your network?”

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