The Evolution and Diversity of Relationships in Canadian Families

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper is a literature review of the nature and influence of close personal relationships of interdependence and dependence on Canadian adults. Contributions for this paper came from social scientists in such diverse fields as social, motivational and developmental psychology; sociology; marriage and family studies; anthropology; evolutionary biology; and philosophy. Although the majority of this paper involves a description of the relationship literature, an important aspect involves a critical analysis.

This paper begins by describing what is usually meant by close personal relationships of dependence and interdependence. Close personal relationships are generally ones that are *expected* to endure over time, and are characterized by interactions that are intimate, frequent, occur in diverse social settings and have a strong impact on both individuals. Generally, those involved in close relationships are also motivated by a mutual desire to promote each other's interests. Relationships that are close are *usually* interdependent—a change in one person causes a change in the other. Those involved in a close relationship will alternatively rely on (or depend on) their partner from time to time. Such *mutual dependencies* blur the distinction between interdependence and dependence. It is only when the provision of care and support is the primary characteristic of a relationship that it is considered a relationship of dependence.

Section II of this paper examines some of the main theoretical frameworks that have been applied to research on relationships, including attachment theory, structural-functionalism, symbolic interactionism, social exchange theory, and feminist theories. While these theories all have broad applications, this paper will examine their contributions to our understanding of relationships. Of course, this is not an exhaustive survey of all theories, and those included in this paper were chosen because they were often cited in research on relationships.

Next, Section III is an investigation of some recent statistical trends in the types of relationships that Canadians form, interpreted within the changing socio-political climate. Since most relationships occur within families, these trends were considered for their impact on “the family.” Social trends such as a lower birthrate, an increase in the number of couples postponing marriage, an increase in the divorce rate, and an increase in the formation of common-law unions. are partly responsible for noticeable changes in the structure of Canadian families. Other demographic changes such as the aging population, an increase in the number of women in the paid labour force, and an increase in the number of adult children living at home, have also influenced the family.

While the structure of the family has changed, there has not been a parallel shift in “family” ideology. Naming certain groups as families is a source of power. Those who are families are more often included in social science research. Definitions of “family” also determine who benefits from social, legal and economic policies. Examples of relationships that are often missing from discourse on the family, include: same-sex couples; those who “live with relatives” (e.g., adult siblings); friends who are considered family; those who live in collectives, communities, or circles of care; and those who live in separate households. These “invisible” families are considered in this paper.

Why do adults form relationships? Many researchers attempt to find universal characteristics that make relationships valuable and satisfying. Section IV examines some of the most common characteristics of relationships, including interdependence, power, love, intimacy, commitment and dependence, and the basic human needs they fulfill. The research indicated that satisfying relationships tend to be reasonably equal, mutually committed, loving, respectful, and safe. Such relationships meet our economic, physical, social, psychological and interpersonal needs. Loved-ones also help us feel important and worthy, socially integrated, safe, and secure. Consequently, close relationships make us happier and physically and mentally healthier.

This paper concludes with an examination of the links between relationships and society, which may be relevant to social policy. One recommendation is to examine the meaning of "family." Since diverse family structures can fulfill family functions (e.g., socializing children, caregiving, procreating, providing support and love), perhaps a functional definition of the family is more appropriate than structural definitions. Another consistent finding is that women do most of the caregiving within families. Although caregiving has high social value, it also has many psychological, financial and emotional costs for the caregiver. Thus, another recommendation is for social policies and programmes to provide more support for this unpaid work. In order to develop appropriate social policies and programmes, there is also a need for more research on the challenges faced by diverse Canadian families.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Close Personal Relationships of Interdependence and Dependence

Both the lay person and social scientist recognize the central role of close relationships in human life. Perhaps it is partly because the term “relationship” encompasses such diverse forms, from acquaintances or associates, to friends, family-members and lovers. Broadly defined, relationships can involve two or more people who have an impact on each other (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983). Moreover, relationships can be personal or impersonal, and interdependent and/or dependent. Since the focus of this paper is on close personal relationships of interdependence and dependence, these qualifiers are important to examine in more detail.

1. Defining close personal relationships

What distinguishes close personal relationships (e.g., intimate friendships, marriage and marriage-like relationships, and parent-child relationships) from other relationships? The relationships we develop with friends and family are qualitatively different from those we develop with others in the community like grocers and postal carriers (LaFollette, 1996). Relationships can range in their frequency, intensity, and diversity of contact (Kelley et al., 1983); and their levels of intimacy, importance and satisfaction (Berg & Piner, 1990).

Close relationships are generally *expected* to endure over time because individuals are committed to each other (Berscheid, 1983; Wright, D. E., 1999). Close personal friends or family members are generally characterized as unique and irreplaceable, and the relationship involves high disclosure, open communication, mutual concern and interest, and voluntary interaction—characteristics of *intimacy*. Partners in an intimate relationship are also emotionally bonded or connected (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983; Wright, D. E., 1999). Impersonal or casual relationships, on the other hand, are perceived as interchangeable because they are often more role-based (e.g., retailer-consumer), and such relationships generally involve little disclosure or affection—characteristics of *superficial* relationships (LaFollette, 1996; McCarthy, 1989; Wright, P. H., 1989).

Should close relationships be defined by affect? *Affect* is "an antiseptic term, but one that encompasses without prejudice the entire range of quality and intensity of human emotion and feeling, from mild irritation to raging hatred to blinding joy to placid contentment" (Berscheid, 1983, p. 110). It is a popular view that mutual positive affect is a characteristic of close relationships (Berscheid, 1983; Kelley et al., 1983; Larson, 1976b). For example, some researchers argue that close relationships are characterized ". . .by a mutual desire to promote the other's interests" (LaFollette, 1996, p. 10). Thus, LaFollette argues that if individuals are promoting the interests of the relationship and each other, then close relationships are, by definition, inherently valuable, satisfying and not injurious (i.e., promote positive affect). However, some researchers argue that close relationships are not always characterized by positive affect (e.g., Bernardes, 1997; Berscheid & Peplau, 1983; Wright, D. E., 1999). Such researchers suggest that close relationships can also be negative--where the relationship lacks warmth or affection, or where one person mistreats or abuses the other. Moreover, they also recognize that most people involved in a close relationship will experience difficult times and still perceive the relationship as close. Thus, whether close relationships can be characterized by negative affect is debatable.

2. Defining Interdependence and Dependence

Relationships can also be defined by such characteristics as interdependence and dependence. Broadly speaking, people are interdependent if ". . . a change in one person causes a change in the other and vice versa" (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983, p. 12). Interdependent relationships are also close relationships, but not always. People are more likely to be interdependent if (1) their shared activities are *complex* (rather than simple), (2) they experience *frequent* interactions, (3) the degree of impact is *strong* or *intense*, (4) they engage in *diverse* activities (e.g., sexual, recreational, work, intellectual), (5) their influence is *mutual* (symmetry-asymmetry dimension), and (6) all of these activities occur over a relatively long *duration* of time (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983; and Kelley et al., 1983).

Some researchers (e.g., Larson, 1976b) define interdependence as the development of *mutual dependencies*. This type of definition highlights the difficulty of conceptually distinguishing between interdependence and dependence. It suggests that interdependence may not always be equally balanced within a relationship, and that individuals will alternatively rely on (or be dependent upon) their partner. Dependence has also been viewed as psychological attachment and commitment to remaining in a relationship (Rusbult, 1980; 1991). Moreover, the development and negotiation of a relationship leads to dependence as ". . .each person reveals his or her dependence on the partner, acceptance of that dependence, and willingness to make the adaptations it necessitates. With such revelations, each person becomes more willing to let himself or herself become dependent in return" (Kelley, 1983, p. 301). Thus, in voluntary relationships between adults, the concepts of interdependence and dependence sometimes overlap.

In other types of relationships, dependence is readily apparent. The first relationship we all experience as an infant is a relationship of dependence with a caregiver. A dependent relationship may also exist when an adult provides care for another adult. "When the giving of support becomes all pervasive in a personal relationship, one person is labeled as a caregiver, and other features of the relationship become almost secondary" (La Gaipa, 1990, p. 132).

Of course, there are other kinds of dependence besides receiving care. The Vanier Institute of the Family (2000) suggests that individuals may also be financially, economically, psychologically, and/or emotionally dependent upon their family. Some researchers have identified certain general patterns of dependence in heterosexual marriage or marriage-like relationships. For example, women more often rely on men for financial support; while men tend to rely on women for emotional support, to nurture the family, and to maintain the home (Nett, 1993, Vannoy-Hiller & Philliber, 1989).

Thus, while relationships vary on a number of characteristics—from impersonal to personal, superficial to intimate and interdependent to dependent—this paper considers how *close personal relationships* influence adults. While people intuitively recognize that relationships are valuable, it is difficult to ". . . identify the essence and value of a personal relationship. . ." (Wright, P. H.,1989, p. 17). Nevertheless, this paper attempts to summarize the main characteristics of relationships and identify the basic needs they fulfill. First, a consideration of some relationship theories will provide the groundwork for these tasks.

II. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Since most people know something about relationships and families, what can social scientists add to our knowledge on this topic? Using the scientific method, researchers are able to distinguish individual experiences from valid and reliable findings. Thousands of studies have been conducted on a wide range of relationship topics. Careful studies help discern which common sense notions (or folk wisdom) about relationships have empirical support, and which are misleading and incorrect (Epstein, 2000; Wright, P. H., 1989). Social scientists investigate social behaviour, thoughts and emotions; from an individual, interpersonal, cultural, historical and/or political perspective. Of course, research on social behaviour has its limitations, but it can provide useful insights because it is more rigorous than individual experiences, and allows us to test the validity or "truth" of common sense notions.

How researchers understand and investigate relationships—how relationships develop and are maintained, the impact they have, and their importance in our lives—is influenced by the theoretical lens they use. Theoretical perspectives

> define what we should study, what questions we should ask, how we should ask them, what methods we should use to gather information, and how we should interpret the answers or information we obtain. (Schwartz & Scott, 2000)

There are many theoretical perspectives that influence our understanding of relationships, and the ones that will be examined in this section of the paper include: attachment theory, structural-functionalism, symbolic interactionism, social exchange theory and feminist theories. These theories all have broad applications and have been applied to a wide range of behaviours. However, this paper will examine their contributions and applications to our understanding of relationships. For example, in Section III of this paper, structural-functionalism provides a context for debates regarding the “decline” of the family. In Section IV, each theory is useful for examining relationship characteristics and helps to explain why relationships are valuable or satisfying. For example, social exchange and feminist theories are used to explain power and commitment; while both the attachment theory and symbolic interactionism help explain love.

Of course, this is not an exhaustive survey of all theories, and several are absent even though they have also been applied to relationships. For example, personality theorists recognize that certain traits, such as high self-esteem, contribute to the development of healthy, satisfying relationships (e.g., Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Hanna, 2000). Additionally, family development and family life-cycle approaches, for example, emphasize that families must respond to social and emotional developmental challenges. These challenges are often influenced by the age and developmental needs of family members, particularly children. They include such events as marriage, childbirth and retirement, for example (Acock & Demo, 1994; Larson, 1976a; Nett, 1993;

Zimmerman, 1992). The theories included in this paper were selected because they were often cited in research on relationships, and they were often included in text books on the family and relationships (e.g., Schwartz & Scott, 2000). Thus, in this section we consider some of the main theories that have been applied to relationships. This will provide a framework for the research presented in the remainder of this paper.

A. Attachment Theory

Attachment theory is an evolutionary-based approach that suggests people are naturally motivated to develop close relationships with others (Koski & Shaver, 1997; Wright, D. E., 1999). Attachment can generally be defined as a strong affectional connection with another person. This theory was developed by John Bowlby who investigated children who had been institutionalized as infants. He found that experiences with primary attachment figures (caregivers) early in life (especially the first three years) influenced children's physical and psychological health, and later adult relationships. Children have basic needs for comfort, care, safety and security. According to this theory, children instinctively direct their attachment behaviours to the person who usually responds to their needs. As a result of the way the caregiver responds, children can develop a *secure* or *insecure* attachment style. Secure attachments develop when caregivers consistently respond to their child's needs and comfort them when they are in distress. This style is common of most infants. They tend to feel comfortable "us[ing] the caregiver as a secure base for exploration" (Hazan & Shaver, 1994, p. 6), they can be comforted by their caregiver, and they prefer their caregiver to strangers. Other infants develop one of two types of insecure attachment styles. *Anxious/Ambivalent* attachments develop when caregivers do not respond consistently to the needs of the infant. Such infants do not engage in exploration and are not easily comforted by their caregiver. *Anxious/Avoidant* attachment tends to develop if caregivers are consistently unresponsive to the needs of the infant. Such infants tend to respond similarly to strangers and their caregiver.

How does this theory apply to adult relationships? As a result of experiences with the caregiver, children develop memories, beliefs, and attitudes about the self, relationships, and the self in relation to others. There is evidence that the patterns established as an infant are relatively stable but can vary depending on characteristics of specific relationships (Shaver, Collins & Clark, 1996; Wright, D. E., 1999). For example, securely attached adults tend to develop satisfying relationships because they consistently and appropriately respond to their partner's needs. They also invest their time and other resources in relationships in order to develop stable and trusting friendships and love relationships (Shaver et al., 1996; Zeifman & Hazan, 1997). Anxious-ambivalent adults find it difficult to form lasting relationships because they tend to be very jealous and obsessed with their partners. Those who develop anxious-avoidant attachment styles as infants tend to avoid close relationships as adults, and consequently report feeling lonely. Thus, the earliest relationships children have with their caregivers form representations of what a relationship with adults will be like (Koski & Shaver, 1997; Shaver et al., 1996).

This theory benefits from the incorporation of diverse social science approaches. It helps explain the development of satisfying relationships between infants and adults, and also helps explain adult relationships. One limitation of this approach is that because it is grounded in socio-biology it takes a very deterministic view of relationships, incorrectly suggesting that it is very difficult, if not impossible, for a person to change their relationship behaviours. Additionally, it fails to consider innate temperament differences that can also influence how caregivers respond to infants (Hazan & Shaver, 1994).

B. Structural-Functionalism

This theory was one of the dominant sociological theories of the family until the 1960s (Nett, 1993; Schwartz & Scott, 2000). It combines two ideas—structure and function. The structure refers to the underlying organizational structure, while function considers how things work (Luxton, 1996). A functional analysis, for example, considers social institutions (e.g., family, government, religion, the legal system, and the education system) are interrelated, and how they contribute to the functioning of society (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983; La Gaipa, 1990; Schwartz & Scott, 2000).

There are several functional prerequisites necessary for a society to survive. For example, procreation is necessary to provide new members for society, and families usually fulfill this need. The need to socialize and educate children is usually met by the education system. The production and distribution of goods is usually met by economic systems. In some societies, families meet all of the functions necessary for society, but in others they do not (Larson, 1976a).

This approach tends to emphasize that the traditional heterosexual nuclear model of the family is the most adaptive arrangement for meeting the needs of individuals and society. It emphasizes gender role differentiation, viewing the wife's role as caring for the family and home, fulfilling expressive and nurturing duties, while the husband's role is instrumental—to financially provide for the family (Acock & Demo, 1994; Nett, 1993; Schwartz & Scott, 2000).

One criticism of this approach is that it tends to confuse the structure of the family with the functions it fulfills. That is, researchers attempt to find the "best" family structure or argue that certain structures are "better" than other structures (Eichler, 1997). This approach is problematic because knowing the structure of families tells us very little about the social experiences of those living within the family (e.g., how they interact, raise children and communicate), and the impact it has on their social and psychological well-being (Acock & Demo, 1994). Since a variety of family "types" meet the functional prerequisites of society, the structure is not as important as whether families fulfill the functions necessary to operate effectively (Eichler, 1997).

A second criticism is that structural-functionalists tend to assume that the family is a universally similar structure. This misconception is what Eichler (1997) calls the *monolithic bias* in research on the family. Research on families in other cultures and the diversity of family structures today demonstrates that families are not all the same. Third, this approach has been criticized for its conservative bias that assumes "if a particular social form had existed for any length of time, it must be functional. . ." (Luxton, 1996, p. 44). It does not consider the fact "that something might be wrong with the system" (Schwartz & Scott, 2000, p. 43). Moreover, the function of particular subsystems of society is often difficult to identify. For example, while structural-functionalists argue that a gender-based division of labour helps society operate efficiently, most other researchers would argue that it subordinates women, which is not functional for society (Acock & Demo, 1994).

C. Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interaction theory is a social psychological theory that investigates how people define social situations, and how they construct meaning out of social interactions (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983). It is based on the assumption that people communicate through shared symbols, and one of the main symbols is language. This is a social constructionist approach that assumes people construct their own view of reality that is based on previous experiences that occur within a particular cultural context. We learn about relationships and how to behave in relationships through socialization from our family, teachers, significant others and the media. The implication of this is that the meaning of social concepts will vary depending on the individual and the socio-cultural context. It also suggests that people have their own understanding of concepts like family, relationships, marriage and love, for example.

This theory also emphasizes the importance of expectations about how others should behave. People learn to behave in ways that are expected by society. Satisfaction will depend on the congruence between our expectations regarding relationship behaviours and the behaviours that actually occur. Thus, there is no one "objective" definition of satisfaction in a relationship because it will differ for each individual (Zimmerman, 1992; Larson, 1976a). This theory also allows us to understand how concepts like the family change over time, and how they vary between and within cultures.

Symbolic interactionist approaches have been criticized because they cannot explain why, despite the pressure to conform to societal norms, some people do not conform. Additionally, it incorrectly tends to assume that families are harmonious groups working together to promote their shared interests. It argues that conflicts or violence are the result of problems with individuals, rather than social problems (Luxton, 1996). This approach has also been criticized because it ignores “objective” definitions, which makes it difficult to apply this theory.

D. Social Exchange Theory

The social exchange theory is a social psychological approach to understanding relationships. This theory is a kind of economic model of behaviour that suggests people weigh the rewards (e.g., love, social support, social status) and costs (e.g., conflict, inequities, household labour, childcare) of particular behaviours. The *outcome* or “profit” is the difference between the rewards minus the costs. In general, people prefer outcomes that are rewarding or “profitable” (Acock & Demo, 1994; Rusbult, 1991; Rusbult & Arriaga, 1997; Wright, D. E., 1999). Two variants of social exchange theory will be discussed: Thibaut and Kelley’s Theory of Social Interdependence, and Equity Theory.

1. Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) Theory of social interdependence

There are several variants of the social exchange theory, but the one that is cited most often is John Thibaut and Harold Kelley's (1959) *theory of social interdependence* (Wright, D. E., 1999). In addition to considering the *outcomes* (rewards minus costs) people also make comparisons with two other standards when determining the benefits of an exchange situation or the relationship. The first, the *comparison level*, suggests that we compare our current relationship with the relationships of others who are similar to us (e.g., our friends), and our relationships in the past (e.g., what our relationship was like 10 years ago). The second is the *comparison level for alternatives*, which is based on perceptions of alternatives to our current relationship. An important point is that subjective perceptions of rewards and comparison levels are key, not whether a relationship may be considered "objectively" valuable (Rusbult, 1991).

While the comparison level helps us determine our level of satisfaction, the comparison level for alternatives helps us determine our level of dependence on the relationship. That is, if an individual perceives that any alternative is better than the relationship, then they will likely leave—they are *independent*. However, this theory also explains how people may become *dependent* and remain in an unsatisfying relationship. For example, a woman in a marital relationship with children, who realizes that leaving her marriage means she will have to face poverty and the social stigma associated with divorce and single-parenthood, may perceive these alternatives as worse than remaining in an unsatisfying relationship. Thus, social interdependence theory distinguishes relationship satisfaction or attraction from dependence (Alcock, Carment & Sadava, 1998; Wright, D. E.,1999).

2. Equity Theory

A second type of social exchange theory, equity theory, suggests that people are more satisfied with a relationship when they receive rewards that are proportional to their costs (input). Perceived fairness is the focus of this approach. It suggests that people generally want to get out of a relationship what they put into it. Relationships are not equitable particularly when individuals “underbenefit” relative to their contributions to the relationship. Such a state causes distress that is proportionate to the inequity, and the distress encourages people to restore equity.

Distress caused by inequity is particularly common when imbalances occur early in the development of a relationship, in a casual relationship, or an encounter with a stranger. When relationships become close, trust and forgiveness of temporary imbalances often replace feelings of distress (Acock & Demo, 1994; Wright, D. E., 1999). Nevertheless, inequity beyond some point tends to make relationships intolerable, and close relationships are healthier and more “successful” when the partners perceive their contributions are equitable (Vannoy-Hiller & Philliber, 1989).

Social exchange theories are advantageous because they can be applied to many types of social behaviour (Rusbult & Arriaga, 1997; Berscheid, 1985). These theories also help explain how “ . . .the line between commitment to a good relationship and entrapment in a poor one can be a fine line indeed” (Wright, D. E., 1999, p. 240). That is, there is a difference between the quality and stability of a relationship. If both individuals in a relationship find it is profitable or rewarding and it is better than any alternatives, then the relationship is high in terms of quality. If, however, one individual is “too dependent” on the relationship, and alternatives are perceived as worse than the relationship, then the relationship can remain stable even if it is dissatisfying.

Because social exchange theories are based on a reinforcement paradigm, many aspects of a relationship cannot be adequately explained by this approach. For example, passionate love sometimes develops under unlikely circumstances that are not always rewarding (Walster, 1974). Additionally, it does not explain why people often make large sacrifices for others in a relationship. An exchange theorist would argue that rewards and costs are not objective, and depend on an individual’s priorities and values (Wright, D. E., 1999). The subjective nature of rewards and costs makes it impossible to argue against social exchange theories because researchers can provide a cost-benefit analysis that justifies almost any behaviour (Schwartz & Scott, 2000).

Another criticism of theories based on social exchange is that they tend to assume people are rational decision-makers when it comes to relationships. In reality, behaviour is very complex and often influenced by strong emotions. Moreover, people are not always “free” to choose the life they feel is the most rewarding (Acock & Demo, 1994; Berscheid, 1985; Schwartz & Scott, 2000). A third critique is the complexity of such theories. Researchers adhering to this approach often use quantitative representations of interdependence with very complex mathematical formulae that are difficult to explain, difficult to understand and, therefore, difficult to apply (Berscheid, 1985; Rusbult & Arriaga, 1997; Schwartz & Scott, 2000).

E. Feminist Theories

Feminists have made several contributions to research on family and relationships. Since there is not one single feminist theory or perspective, I will describe some feminist approaches, their main contributions to this area of research, and some critiques. Four variants of the feminist theoretical perspectives include liberal, cultural, radical, and socialist feminism.

Liberal feminism focuses on the similarities between men and women. Thus, proponents of this approach believe that when women are given the same opportunities as men they will be equal (Bernardes, 1997). To achieve the goals of equality, changes must be made in laws and social values.

Cultural feminism recognizes the differences between women and men. Such feminists argue that women's characteristics and the work they do (e.g., unpaid work caring for the family and the home) have traditionally been devalued. They argue for society's need to value and respect the contributions and strengths of women (Crawford & Unger, 2000; Matlin, 2000).

Radical feminism emphasizes that, throughout history, women's oppression has been the result of patriarchal societies where men's power and control are used to dominate women. Sexism permeates all levels of our society from interpersonal relationships and families, to the power held by world leaders. Thus, this approach emphasizes the importance of eliminating patriarchy in order to address these problems (Bernardes, 1997; Crawford & Unger, 2000; Luxton, 1996; Matlin, 2000).

Socialist feminism argues that economic disparity rooted in capitalism is the origin of inequality (Bernardes, 1997; Luxton, 1996). This approach recognizes that many kinds of social class divisions can lead to oppression, including discrimination based on social class, race, and gender, for example (Crawford & Unger, 2000).

While these feminist perspectives differ, there are some underlying similarities. They all regard women as valuable human beings. They also recognize that sexism privileges men and leads to discrimination against women, but emphasize different social factors that contribute to inequality. Feminist approaches are also influenced by social constructionism. Such researchers also identify the need to promote social change so that all women can lead safe and satisfying lives (Crawford & Unger, 2000; Luxton, 1996).

There have been several advantages of applying feminist theories to research on relationships and the family. When feminist theory is applied to the family, researchers tend to recognize that each individual has a different perspective of the family. For example, it suggests that men and women will experience relationships differently as a result of different socialization processes (Larson, 1976a; Luxton, 1996). In general, marriage is more beneficial for men because it provides them with emotional support that is typically not available elsewhere, and through their wives' direct and indirect support, their occupational progress is enhanced. In contrast, women are generally oppressed and disadvantaged by traditional marriage and family relationships. This is because marriage is more detrimental to women's psychological adjustment and well-being than it is for men. Women also receive fewer emotional benefits from marriage relative to men, and their occupational achievement is slowed. This is partly because women typically do the majority of work in the family that is devalued and unpaid, such as caring for family members and doing routine housework (Acock & Demo, 1994; Crawford & Unger, 2000). Radical feminist theorists have also raised awareness of how unsafe families and intimate relationships are for women and children who suffer from men's violence and sexual assault (Crawford & Unger, 2000; Luxton, 1996; Matlin, 2000). Feminist theories recognize that power imbalances and abuse are harmful to women.

Thus, feminist scholars argue that the traditional nuclear family is not functional to society because it discriminates against women and privileges men (Luxton, 1996). Some would argue that the most functional family forms operate as collectives or co-operatives, allowing people to share resources and care for each other (Acock & Demo, 1994; Luxton, 1996). Feminist researchers also attempt to be more inclusive in their approach to understanding relationships and the family. For example, such researchers tend to include diverse family structures (e.g., same-sex households and single-parent families) and diverse individuals (e.g., visible minorities) in their research. Moreover, because feminists often take a critical approach they foster an awareness of the limitations of past research (Schwartz & Scott, 2000).

The most frequent critique of feminist approaches is that they are women-centered. Feminist theories have also been criticized for their diversity and critical approach, because such characteristics prevent the development of one unifying theory. Feminist scholars criticize feminist theories and research for being "biased toward the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual women" (Schwartz & Scott, 2000, p. 52). Such critics argue for the need to include more diversity in analyses of oppression, and to understand the experiences of those who are subjected to multiple forms of discrimination (e.g., based on race, sexual orientation, social class and ability).

III. THE DIVERSITY OF RELATIONSHIPS - RECENT STATISTICAL TRENDS

Relationships are very important to the well-being of individuals and society. The purpose of this section is to outline some recent statistical trends in the main *types* of relationships that Canadian adults form. Since Canada is a "couple- and family-oriented society" (Larson, Goltz, & Munro, 2000, p. 1), most relationships are located within these types of social organizations. Thus, the first part of this section examines some of the noteworthy demographic changes that have shaped and will continue to shape the structure of family relationships.

Since some of the common methods of defining the family have caused certain family structures to become "invisible," Part B examines methods of defining the family, while Part C examines who is missing from common definitions. Because value judgements often influence interpretations of changes in family structure, some interpret change as "crisis," while others suggest it reflects the ability of families to adapt to the needs of Canadians. Thus, this section concludes by presenting some of the issues in this debate.

A. Demographic Trends Influencing Families

Families are important to most Canadians. They are the first social institution that most children know and they provide the location for most close personal relationships formed by adults. Although the concept "family" has probably existed since the fifteenth or sixteenth century (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990), what this term means has been constantly evolving as a result of social changes and prevailing political ideology. Moreover, "family" is defined in many different ways by lay people, social science researchers, Statistics Canada, the law and other social institutions (Baker, 1996a; Che-Alford, Allan & Butlin, 1994; Larson et al., 2000). One of the most common uses of the term family is the "census family." A consistent finding over the last fifty years was that for any given census, approximately three-quarters of the households in Canada could be categorized by one of the three main categories of census family: a couple with unmarried children, a couple (married or common law), or a single-parent family (Baker, 1996a; The Vanier Institute of the Family, 2000). Selected Census data for marriage, common-law relationships and divorce provide some insights into recent statistical trends in the family. Four other major demographic changes shed light on how today's families evolve to meet the needs of individuals: (1) the aging population, (2) the increase in the number of women working outside the home for pay, (3) the declining birth rate, and (4) the increase in the number of adult children living at home.

1. Marriage

Approximately four-fifths of all census families are married couples (Boyd, 1988), and the majority of Canadians (85% to 87%) marry at some point in their lives (Baker, 1996a, 1996b; The Vanier Institute of the Family, 2000). In 1996, 87% of Canadians were married. There are two main trends occurring. First, the marriage rate is increasing--relatively more Canadians were married in the twentieth century than in the nineteenth century. Second, people are generally delaying marriage until they are older (i.e., in their late 20s and early 30s) (The Vanier Institute of the Family, 2000). Thus, Canadians are not avoiding marriage (Boyd, 1988), ". . .it is merely occupying less of the average adult's lifetime" (Cunningham & Antill, 1995, p. 166-167).

2. Common-law relationships

Currently, we do not have one term to describe opposite-sex couples who share a residence as wife and husband. Such relationships have been called a common-law relationship, common-law marriage, unmarried-couple household, cohabitants, trial marriage and de facto marriage (Cunningham & Antill, 1995; Matlin, 2000). Findings from the 1995 General Social Survey (investigating 11,000 Canadians over 15 years old), indicate that 94% of 30- to 69-year-old women were involved in a common-law relationship. Furthermore, there was a slight delay in the formation of such relationships, because only 87% of 20- to 29 -year-olds formed similar relationships (Le Bourdais, Neill & Turcotte, 2000).

While marriage is still the most common relationship formed by Canadian adults, common-law relationships are definitely *increasing* over previous decades (Boyd, 1988; Cunningham & Antill, 1995; Eichler, 1983; Le Bourdais et al., 2000). Since the early 1980s, the number of couples who formed common-law relationships has almost tripled. For example, in 1981, approximately 6% of couples were in common-law relationships, while in 1990 this increased to approximately 12% (Baker, 1996a; Che-Alford et al., 1994), and 1996 saw a further increase to 13.5% (The Vanier Institute of the Family, 2000). Since questions regarding common-law relationships were only asked for the first time in 1991, part of this trend can be explained by an increase in reporting (La Novara, 1993). Moreover, since there is less social stigma attached to living common law, this may also explain the increase in this type of living arrangement.

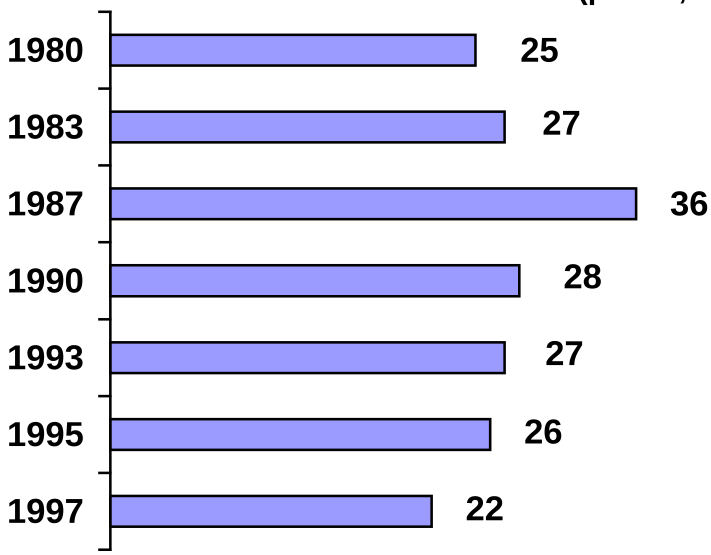
This trend is definitely age-related, since younger cohorts of women prefer common-law relationships as their first union (Boyd, 1988; Cunningham & Antill, 1995). For example, in the most recent census, 52% of 20- to 29-year-olds began their conjugal life as a common-law couple as compared with only 1% of 60- to 69-year-olds (Le Bourdais et al., 2000). Additionally, in Quebec, common-law relationships are more frequent than elsewhere in Canada, and constitute the majority of the first type of conjugal unions (La Novara, 1993; Le Bourdais et al., 2000). Currently, most Canadians cohabit only once and then marry their partner (White, 1987). As cohabitation continues to become more socially acceptable and conventional, fewer differences will be observed between these types of conjugal relationships.

3. Divorce

Through the 1970s, as a result of the institution of the federal *Divorce Act* of 1968, there was an increase in the divorce rate (Baker, 1996b; Boyd, 1988; Cunningham & Antill, 1995; Eichler, 1983; The Vanier Institute of the Family, 2000). You can see in

Figure 1[1] that the divorce rate reached a peak in 1987 and has been dropping since then. By 1997, the divorce rate was at its lowest point since 1980. The declining divorce rate can be partly explained by the fact that there are fewer candidates for divorce as a result of an increase in common-law unions. Moreover, Canadians are more likely to postpone marriage until they are older, which is a factor that contributes to longer-lasting marriages (Bélanger, 1999).

Figure 1
Crude Divorce Rate (per 10,000 population)



One trend related to divorce is that the number of single-parent families has increased. “In 1991, lone-parent families numbered 954,700, up 12% from 853,600 in 1986, and double the 1971 figure of 477,500” (La Novara, 1993, p. 13). After a divorce, mothers are more likely to receive custody of the children, therefore, most lone-parent families (in 1991 the proportion was 82%) are mothers with their children. The high proportion of single-parent mothers can also be explained by the increasing incidence of

[1] The data for Figure 1 are from Bélanger (1999, p. 38).

young, never-married females who are raising children on their own (La Novara, 1993). Female lone-parent families have the lowest annual income relative to other families, and have the most difficulty finding affordable housing (Che-Alford et al., 1994).

Another major trend related to the increased divorce rate, is that people who divorce are more likely to form another union (marriage or common-law relationship) than remain single. For example, the most recent census indicated that 90% of 30- to 39-year-olds who had divorced formed a second union (Le Bourdais, Neill, & Turcotte, 2000). This has led to more blended families[2] than there were in the past (Boyd, 1988; The Vanier Institute of the Family, 2000). For example, in 1967 12.3% of the families were blended, while in 1991 this number increased to 32.3% (Baker, 1996a). Thus, the most recent census indicated that at least one in three families was blended to include children born from different unions (The Vanier Institute of the Family, 2000).

It is important to note some of the limitations of divorce statistics. First, it is very difficult to estimate the number of divorces, particularly those that occurred in the past (Beaujot, 1990). In the 1900s in Canada, there was almost no record of divorce because of the social stigma and economic impossibility for women to leave their husbands (Eichler, 1997). Historically, marriages dissolved but were not legally divorced, and since there are no statistics on separations, statistics underestimate the frequency of the dissolution of relationships in the past (The Vanier Institute of the Family, 2000). Another limitation is that value judgements are often linked to presentations of divorce statistics.

[2] Blended, remarried, or stepfamilies are families that "are formed when a widowed or divorced person remarries, creating a new family that includes the children of one or both spouses" (Schwartz & Scott, 2000, p. 3).

Because of the social value associated with marriage, rising divorce rates are often presented as a social problem. “But it is a problem only if there is something lamentable about the collapse of a marriage. If there is not, an increasing number of divorces is no more a problem than an increasing number of tennis matches” (Graham, 1989, p. 200). In fact, some research suggests that divorce may be beneficial. According to Clark (1998), data from the 1995 Statistics Canada’s General Social Survey suggests “that the most common reasons why someone might decide to pursue a divorce were abusive behaviour, unfaithfulness, lack of love and respect, and a partner who drinks too much” (p. 3). Since it can be emotionally positive to end a relationship when it is inequitable or abusive, divorce may have some positive consequences (Huston & Schwartz, 1995).

4. The aging population

It is undeniable that the Canadian population is aging. Advances in health care have dramatically increased a Canadian’s life expectancy. For example, in 1931, males were only expected to live until 60 and females 62; but by 1991, the life expectancy for males was 74 and was 81 for females (Baker, 1996a). Today, approximately 12% of the population is over 65. By the year 2011, it is estimated that 14% (5 million people) will be 65 and over (Martin-Matthews, 2000).

One consequence of the aging population is the increase in the number of intergenerational relationships. For example, it is more common for parents and their children to share 50 years together and for grandparents to see their grandchildren grow to adulthood. Moreover, great-grandparents are now playing more of a role than they ever have (Martin-Matthews, 2000). Another consequence is that caring for the elderly has become the main challenge of the 1990s and beyond (McDaniel, 1996). Additionally, “as adults age, their social networks decrease in size because of immobility and the deaths of family members and friends” (Koski & Shaver, 1997, p. 44). This complicates the issue of caregiving by decreasing the number of family and friends who can provide support for those in need. Since providing support for dependents is an important characteristic of relationships, this issue will be discussed in more detail in Section IV.

There are noticeable statistical trends regarding the living arrangements of the elderly. Statistics Canada data suggests that only between 3 to 8% of the elderly live with their adult children (Mitchell, 2000). This can be partly explained by the fact that the number of seniors living alone is increasing—from 18% in 1971, to 26% in 1991 (Che-Alford et al., 1994). Most often, it is elderly women who live alone. “The high percentage of elderly women living alone is due, in large part, to women having a longer life expectancy than men: many women live on their own after their spouses die” (La Novara, 1993, p. 13). Bess (1999) summarized findings from the 1996 General Social Survey to describe the living arrangements of elderly women.

> Three in four Canadian widows aged 65 and over (about 661,000) lived by themselves. Another 11% (about 95,000) lived with an unmarried adult son or daughter, while a further 11% shared a home with a married adult child and their families. The remainder (36,000) lived with siblings, other relatives, or friends. (p. 2-3)

Thus, the statistical trends regarding the living arrangements of the elderly indicate that the primary source of care for older adults is not their children. Rather, most elderly men are cared for by their wives, while the majority of widows tend to live on their own.

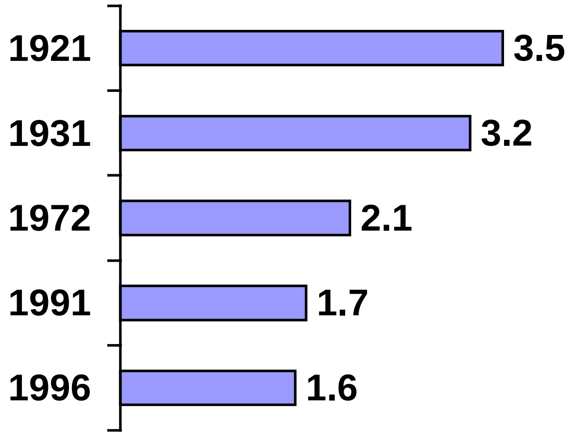
5. Women and paid work

Women are increasingly working outside the home for pay, which is a trend that is likely to continue (Baker, 1996a; Beaujot, 1990; Vannoy-Hiller & Philliber, 1989). For example, their participation rate increased from approximately 52% in 1981, to 68% in 1991 (Che-Alford et al., 1994). Because our culture expects that women should be the primary caregivers, this trend has resulted in changes in child care patterns. For example, in 1971, 1.4 million children were in need of "alternative" child care (i.e., non-parental child care for at least part of the day), while in 1990, this increased to 3 million children (Nett, 1993). With women's increased participation in the labour force they are becoming less financially dependent on men.

6. The declining birthrate

Another major demographic change is that the rate of childbearing has declined (Boyd, 1988; Cunningham & Antill, 1995; Eichler, 1983; Luxton, 1997; Martin-Matthews, 2000). As you can see in Figure 2[3], the average number of children born in Canada is continually declining. Couples today are also delaying having children until their late 20s and early 30s, or decide to remain childless (Baker, 1996a; Beaujot, 1990; Boyd, 1988; The Vanier Institute of the Family, 2000). In 75 years there has been approximately a 54% decline in the birthrate.

Figure 2
Average Fertility Rate



7. Adult children at home

Children are remaining at home longer and also leaving home and then moving back in increasing numbers. According to Mitchell (2000), findings from the 1991 Canadian census suggest that approximately 50% of young adults (aged 20-34) were living with their parents. Moreover, in the 1980s the proportion of parent and adult child co-residence increased 10% since the 1970s. These findings indicate that adult children are prolonging their transition to the post-parental stage, and are remaining dependent on their parents longer than in the past (Baker, 1996b, Mitchell, 2000).

Today, adult children are also more likely to leave home and then return to live with their parents than they were in the past. This cohort of adult children has been termed the *boomerang generation* (Schwartz & Scott, 2000). Mitchell (2000) suggests

[3] The data for Figure 2 are from Baker (1996a), Beaujot (1990), and Boyd (1988).

that findings from the 1995 General Social Survey, indicated that 27% of young adults (aged 19-35) left home and then moved back.

Thus, the statistics indicate that it is quite common for adult children to live with their middle-aged parents. Relatively little is known about this relationship and Statistics Canada did not begin collecting data on this phenomenon until the mid-1990s (Mitchell, 2000). However, it appears that adult children return home or stay at home mainly because of financial problems, partly as a result of the high unemployment rate among young adults (Schwartz & Scott, 2000), or to receive assistance while attending university (Baker, 1996b).

B. Defining “The Family”

The above data represents most Canadian families (approximately three-fourths), however, some families are missing from Statistics Canada data and mainstream social science research.

> Think, for a moment, of one of English-Canada’s most famous families. A fictional family, to be sure, but a very believable one: it consists of an elderly spinster, her brother, and a non-kin child named Anne of Green Gables. By Statistics Canada’s definition of ‘census family,’ this small group is not a family. It is certainly not a traditional nuclear family. Yet we all know it to be a family, not by its form but by what these three people did with and for each other. There were many such families in our past and there are many today. (The Vanier Institute of the Family, 2000, p. xi)

This fictional example suggests that there are many ways to define family, and that previous research has not considered all families. In 1991, for example, “17% of the population did not live in a family” (La Novara, 1993, p. 12). While many of these one million Canadians lived alone (La Novara, 1993) or formed "economic families"[4] (Ghalam, 1996), there were still many people who were excluded when conventional definitions of "the family" were used for research (e.g., same-sex couples, friends who are family, those who live in communities or collectives, and those family members or intimate partners who do not share a household). Thus, it is important to question social and legal definitions of the family that are too-narrowly defined to reflect all families. Broadening current conceptions of the term "family" is necessary because how it is defined has many implications for the well-being of individuals (Ghalam, 1996).

One implication of how the family is defined is that it influences how we understand and discuss families. "Controversies over terminology can sometimes seem like semantic hairsplitting. But language and naming are sources of power" (Crawford & Unger, 2000, p. 24). A theory developed over sixty years ago in psychology, the Whorfian hypothesis or linguistic determinism, suggests that language shapes our thoughts and perceptions of the world (Bootzin, Bower, Crocker & Hall, 1991). This theory suggests that "naming" certain structures as families is a source of power. These structures become "real" and they receive certain social benefits. Social phenomena that are not named, like particular family structures, are less visible and less real (cf., Crawford & Unger, 2000; Janz, 1998). Consequently, some researchers have included "alternative" families in research, or have used "inclusive" or "functional" definitions of families in an attempt to address some of the limitations of previous research.

[4] An economic family is not a census family or a nuclear family. "Only couples or parents who live with never-married children are counted as part of a census family, while an economic family encompasses all relatives living in the same household, regardless of how they are related" (Ghalam, 1996, p. 21). For example, two adult siblings who share a home, or an elderly woman who lives with her adult daughter.

1. Defining families as "alternative"

Some researchers have used terms like "alternative" or "postmodern" to define all family-like relationships that do not represent traditional nuclear families (Acock & Demo, 1994; Baker, 1996b; Bedard, 1992). "Alternative lifestyles refers to more or less permanent relationships that involve practices stigmatized under the former family ideology. . ." (Nett, 1993, p. 369). There are several limitations of using the term "alternative" to describe families that do not represent traditional nuclear families. The term "alternative" dichotomizes families as either representing the traditional nuclear family or not. This places the traditional family as the norm and all other families are seen as deviating from that "norm." It stigmatizes or marginalizes any non-traditional family. Another problem with using "alternative" to describe diverse families is that it does not reflect reality. Since the 1970s, more people have been living outside nuclear family relationships. Thus, in reality, "alternative" families are much more common than the so-called traditional nuclear family.

2. Inclusive definitions

Other researchers have advocated using *inclusive definitions* of the family. This approach emphasizes that families are voluntary and allows individuals to determine who constitutes a family member. Larson et al. (2000) suggest that although the inclusive approach is new in social science research, "using this approach is not helpful because the definitions are too broad and confusing and do not facilitate scientific discourse" (p. 8). One could argue, however, that rather than being detrimental, such a broad definition is beneficial because of its respect for diversity.

3. Functional definitions

Some researchers argue that the structure of a family is less important than its *function* or the *processes* associated with being a family (e.g., Baker, 1996a; Reiss, 1976). Thus, a third approach to understanding the family is to define it by "what people do." For example, some of the functions performed by families include: procreating, socializing and nurturing children, and providing social and economic support (Bailey, 1999; Reiss, 1976). Since diverse family structures can fulfill "family" functions, The Vanier Institute of the Family (2000), suggests defining the family as:

> . . .any combination of two or more persons who are bound together over time by ties of mutual consent, birth and/or adoption or placement and who, together, assume responsibilities for variant combinations of some of the following:
> - physical maintenance and care of group members
> - addition of new members through procreation or adoption
> - socialization of children
> - social control of members
> - production, consumption, distribution of goods and services, and
> - affective nurturance—love. (p. v)

C. "Invisible" Families: Who is Missing from Common Definitions of the Family?

When more inclusive definitions of the family are used, we soon realize that many families are missing or are "invisible" in mainstream social science research. This section of the paper discusses some of these families, including: same-sex couples, those who "live with relatives," friends designated as family, several families of various types who live as a collective (e.g., communal, co-operative or other group), and those who live in separate households. This is certainly not an all-inclusive list, but simply provides some examples of diverse families that are not usually represented in research.

1. Same-sex couples

The prevailing conservative ideology discriminates against lesbians and gay men by excluding them from the "family." Researchers, the general public, and legal policy are also influenced by such biases. "'Family' thus comes to mean just the opposite of homosexuality—a site of stability, caring, responsibility, and happiness amid a sea of social change. This characterization of families is ridiculously wrong" (O'Brien & Goldberg, 2000, p. 117). Contrary to such biased perceptions, gay men and lesbians are obviously found within Canadian families; and they form diverse relationships depending on their age (Kimmel & Sang, 1995), social class, ethnicity, and whether they care for children (O'Brien & Goldberg, 2000).

To counter anti-gay prejudice that "homosexuality" is detrimental to the family, the slogan "we are family" was popular among gay and lesbian organizations in the 1990s. Advocates of this approach argue that there is no logical reason to exclude gay- and lesbian-headed households from being called families.

> They fall under every conceivable sociological criterion for identifying families. They are groups of co-resident kin providing jointly through income-pooling for one another's survival needs of food and shelter. They socialize children, engage in emotional and physical support, and make up part of a larger kin network. (O'Brien & Goldberg, 2000, p. 133)

Cossman (1997) argues that some people within the gay and lesbian community are hesitant to be considered "family" because traditional family ideology reinforces women's subordination, and it is an institution that can be oppressive and exclusionary. Since legal policies typically do not allow for complexity in relationships, this "family" debate has tended to be simplified and dichotomized as either arguing that lesbian and gay individuals want to define their relationships as "families" or not. Cossman (1997) argues that relationships and people are much more complex than this either/or dichotomy suggests. She further recommends that

> no one strategy will be sufficient to challenge the complex way in which we are located both inside and outside family. Our multiple and contradictory positions on the inside/out of family requires that we pursue multiple and potentially contradictory strategies. Since we are both inside and out, we need to be struggling to get in, and we need to be struggling to decentre and deconstruct the inside. (p. 138)

One way of addressing laws that discriminate against same-sex couples has been the development of “registered partnerships” or “domestic partnerships” that allow both same-sex and opposite-sex couples to legalize their unions (Bailey, 1999; Bedard, 1992; Schwartz & Scott, 2000). These terms generally describe cohabiting adult couples who are sexually intimate and unmarried. In 1989, Denmark was the first country to legalize same-sex unions, providing them with most of the same legal rights as opposite-sex couples (Schwartz & Scott, 2000).

There are several limitations to our understanding of gay and lesbian relationships. First, there is no census data on the number of lesbian and gay couples sharing households in Canada. It is fair to say that gay and lesbian individuals represent a large minority of our population--approximately five to ten percent of the male population is exclusively gay, three to ten percent of women are lesbian, and approximately eight to fifteen percent of the general population is bisexual (Arnup, 1997; Bedard, 1992). Several studies suggest that the majority of lesbians (45 to 80%) and gay men (40 to 60%) are involved in a close personal relationship (Bedard, 1992; Kurdek; 1995). Moreover, Arnup (1997) cites a study by Martin (1993) that suggests there are between 3 and 8 million gay and lesbian parents in the United States. No comparable data exists for Canada.

A second critique of mainstream social science research is that it is influenced by heterosexism, which leads to oversights and limitations in our understanding of gay- and lesbian-headed households. Thus, we know relatively little about the characteristics of such relationships (Huston & Schwartz, 1995). Moreover, research in this area is complicated by the difficulty of categorizing people based on their sexuality. The debates about sexuality can be understood as debates between essentialist and constructionist positions (Jagose, 1996). The essentialists assume that heterosexuality is “natural” and “normal,” and that categories of sexuality are dichotomous, mutually exclusive, and fixed for life; while the constructionists assume that sexuality is a cultural construction, influenced by social norms, conditioning, and is changeable and fluid. “Much is invested culturally in representing homosexuality as definitionally unproblematic, and in maintaining heterosexuality and homosexuality as radically and demonstrably distinct from one another” (Jagose, 1996, p. 18). Yet, the fact is that over the course of a lifetime, most homosexual and some heterosexual individuals have been intimate with both same-sex and opposite-sex individuals. What will determine when an individual (and researchers) will define her/himself as primarily homosexual or heterosexual? For example, is a married individual who is having an affair with someone of the same sex, homosexual? Is a woman in a committed same-sex relationship, who does not define herself as a lesbian, heterosexual? The difficulty of answering these questions suggests that it is more difficult to categorize people by their sexuality than most laypeople and researchers assume (Brown, 1995; Huston & Schwartz, 1995; Jagose, 1996; O'Brien & Goldberg, 2000).

A final limitation to our understanding of research in this area is the fact that prejudice understandably prevents many individuals from openly identifying themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual. Thus, research in this area is limited to understanding only the characteristics of those couples and individuals who are "out" (Huston & Schwartz, 1995).

2. "Living with relatives"

Many Canadians who are not defined by Statistics Canada as belonging to a census or nuclear family, still "live with relatives" and form what is called "economic families" (Ghalam, 1996). While a census family includes couples or parents with never-married children, an economic family includes people who share a household with others who are related ". . .by blood, marriage, common law or adoption" (Ghalam, 1996, p. 21). For example, this may include an elderly woman living with her adult children, or two brothers sharing a home.

Ghalam (1996) examined data from the 1991 Canadian census to determine trends regarding those who live with relatives. In general, when people live in an economic family, they are most likely to live with an immediate family member, particularly a sibling or an adult child. Seniors, in general, and senior women in particular, were more likely to live with relatives who were not defined as part of their census family. However, even though the population is aging, seniors are less likely to live with “other” relatives today than they were twenty years ago. This can be partly explained by the fact that more seniors are living alone. The longer life expectancy of women means that they are more likely to be widowed, and, therefore, less likely to live in a census family as compared with elderly men. Most often (25%), women shared a household with their son’s or daughter’s family (Ghalam, 1996).

Some evidence suggests that relationships between adult siblings are becoming increasingly more important. The 1991 census suggested that 30% of those who were 15 years and older were sharing a dwelling with a sibling, and 14% with their sibling’s family (Ghalam, 1996). Moreover, the high birthrate of the 1950s and the aging population means that within the next 20 to 30 years, the elderly will have substantially more siblings alive as compared with the elderly of today. One implication of this trend is that the sibling tie will be the longest in duration of all family relationships (Martin-Matthews, 2000). Perhaps these trends mean that in the future more elderly siblings will care for each other.

Ghalam (1996) also described other trends regarding “living with relatives.” In 1991, men tended to live with relatives when they were young (15 to 35 years), and were more likely than women to live with their siblings or parents. Culture and ethnicity were also important. Aboriginal people (especially the youngest and oldest age groups), and immigrants born outside Europe, were more likely than other Canadians to live with relatives. This trend may partly reflect cultural traditions that emphasize family responsibilities to care for the elderly, for example.

3. Friends Who Are Family

According to Weinstock and Rothblum (1996), the law typically defines family in terms of biological relatives or the formation of legal families through marriage or adoption. In this view, the term “family of friends” is a contradiction because friends do not share a biological or legal connection. We know little about the characteristics and prevalence of such relationships because this is a topic that is rarely investigated. Nevertheless, it appears as though friendships are becoming more important, particularly in industrialized countries as people are choosing more “alternatives” to the so-called traditional nuclear family (McCarthy, 1986). Moreover, in 1991, 6% of Canadians lived with non-relatives (La Novara, 1993). Although the research does not indicate who these “non-relatives” were, it seems logical that a proportion could have been friends.

When people identify their friends as “family,” it has a profound effect on the relationship. “Fictive families,” “fictive kin,” “psychological kinship systems,” “sociopsychological unit” are the terms that have been used to describe friends who are treated as family (D’Augelli & Garnets, 1995; Weinstock & Rothblum, 1996). Such families generally include people who are not related by biology or legal ties, but the relationship is experienced as if they were (Greene, 1998).

> While friendship families may in fact reflect a unique family and/or friendship form, the use of a family discourse to describe our friendships may also reflect the adoption of mainstream assumptions about the privileged role for family in relation to friends. Describing our friends as family may confer greater importance and/or status on our friendships, but so too does it appear to reinforce the hegemony of the family. (Weinstock & Rothblum, 1996, p. 8)

Identifying friends as family suggests that they are very meaningful in one's life. It also suggests that they have certain rights and obligations that friends in one's general social network do not have (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990).

Within the gay and lesbian community, individuals are more likely to form "alternative families comprised of friends" (Weinstock & Rothblum, 1996, p. 7). This is partly because our culture discriminates and oppresses those who are not traditionally heterosexual. If biological family members do not support an individual's sexual orientation or family decisions, then forming "families of friends" to replace or supplement a family of origin becomes particularly important (Kimmel & Sang, 1995; Weinstock & Rothblum, 1996).

Similarly, among the aging population "families of friends" may become more common. For example, Martin-Matthews (2000) describes her investigation of elderly people in Ontario where she found that 4% of non-widowed and 8% of widowed individuals include a friend in their description of family (Martin-Matthews, 2000). Friends are also particularly important in the lives of elderly women—"about one-half of widowed women living on their own in 1996 had a strong attachment to four or more friends. . ." (Bess, 1999, p. 3). Moreover, friendship ties become more important in old age as death or illness terminates marriage-like and other family relationships (McCarthy, 1986).

4. Groups of families

Many researchers fail to recognize family relationships involving those who live in small groups—communities of friends, collectives, co-operatives, or communes.

Communes have been defined as “ . . .a group of people (single or married, with or without children) who live together, sharing many aspects of their lives” (Schwartz & Scott, 2000, p. 214). Historically, the communal movement in the United States began at the end of the eighteenth century. Political instability caused by war (e.g., Civil War) and social activism (e.g., of the 1960s), led to the development of many communes (Schwartz & Scott, 2000). The Israeli kibbutz and the Hutterites in Manitoba are examples of communes that are religious in origin. Communes may also be chosen to provide opportunities for other forms of bonding, such as those developed by midlife lesbians in the San Francisco Bay area in the United States (Kimmel & Sang, 1995). There is also a rapid growth of communes for the elderly in the Netherlands. Today, there are over one thousand communes world-wide (Schwartz & Scott, 2000).

Communities of families also have developed to satisfy the needs of intimacy and companionship that some people felt could not be met by other family structures. While commitment in marriage is to an individual, in a commune, people are committed to the group (Ramey, 1976). The relationships of those in a commune may be sexual or not (Kimmel & Sang, 1995). Members perceive communes as advantageous because of the ability to form egalitarian, personalized, cooperative, and satisfying intimate relationships with a variety of people. Communes also allow for personal and spiritual growth, sharing resources and tasks (e.g., child care), and teaching respect for nature. The disadvantages of communal living include limited privacy and personal freedom, conflicts over authority, legal ambiguity, and restricted parental control (Schwartz & Scott, 2000).

Our culture generally does not support, and often considers it taboo, for people to belong to multiple intimate sexual relationships, such as polygamous relations (i.e., “many spouses,” often wives), or polyamorous relationships (i.e., “many loves”). Similarly, family-related social and legal policies, and our culture in general, are not organized to support collectives or multiple couples. For example, houses are usually built to support one nuclear family, not multiple families; and there are probably no workplaces that acknowledge several spouses for health benefits (Luxton, 1996). Currently, we know very little about the prevalence or characteristics of Canadian relationships where friends are considered family and where people live in collectives or develop communities of relationships.

5. Living in separate households

Sharing a household often seems to be an important defining characteristic of families for many researchers. For example, census and economic families defined by Statistics Canada both require that family-members share a dwelling. According to Ghalam (1996), research from the 1990 General Social Survey indicated that family members who do not share a household also provide important family functions. For example, they do housework, provide financial assistance and are often the main source of emotional support. This is another type of family structure that we know very little about.

D. Family Diversity versus Family Decline

Sometimes researchers argue that changes in the family reflect the ability of families to adapt to meet the changing needs of Canadians (e.g., Rodgers & Witney, 1981), while others interpret the changes as reflecting the decline of the family (e.g., Popenoe, 1993). Generally, from a structural-functionalist point of view, change in the family represents a “crisis;” while from a symbolic interactionist perspective, change is expected because “the family” is not a universal or stable social construct. Family structures differ from culture to culture, and are influenced by social changes within one culture. Issues surrounding this debate will be outlined in this section.

Perceptions of “appropriate” families are influenced by social norms and prevailing political ideology. Several social changes have influenced societal conceptions of the “family”-- the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s; the secularization of people; the liberalization of social attitudes; changing patterns of cohabitation, marriage and divorce; and the formation of social movements to promote civil rights and the acceptance of lesbian and gay relationships. These social changes have allowed diverse family structures to seek recognition and acceptance as families (Bedard, 1992; Luxton, 1997; Nett, 1993; O’Brien & Goldberg, 2000).

During the 1980s in Canada, however, the economic decline, focus on the debt, and the election of conservative parties produced a “neo-conservative” climate (Luxton, 1997). According to Schwartz and Scott (2000),

> its impact, especially on the public, can still be detected. Today, when people talk about the family, they often have in mind this nuclear model. For many people

> the nuclear family remains the ideal form, even though such families are less prevalent today than they were in the past. (p. 43-44)

The prevailing ideology is influenced by conservative political and religious "traditionalists" who argue that the family is in decline or in crisis. The "decline" in "family values" is often blamed on feminism, the sexual revolution and gay and lesbian liberation (Luxton, 1997; Schwartz & Scott, 2000).

When "neo-conservatives" argue that they support "family values," they take a structural-functionalist view, arguing that the "traditional" nuclear family of the 1950s is the most functional family structure. The family of the 1950s was influenced by very unique social conditions--the Great Depression and World War II. That particular social climate valued a traditional nuclear patriarchal family that was white, middle-class, and heterosexual, with a husband and wife who were married for the first time, a male "breadwinner," and a woman who cared for two or three children and the home (Acock & Demo, 1994; Boyd, 1988; Cossman, 1997; Eichler, 1997). This type of family was an aberration, characterized by a low divorce rate, early first marriage and high birthrate. There was more diversity in family structure both prior to and after this period (Acock & Demo, 1994; Schwartz & Scott, 2000).

Conservative family ideology perpetuates the belief that the so-called "traditional" nuclear family is the most functional unit and judges diverse forms of the family as deviant and not functioning as well as the patriarchal structure. Such beliefs also fail to reflect the fact that the idealized family was specific to the 1950s, and does not reflect the majority of today's Canadian families (Larson et al., 2000; Luxton, 1996; Schwartz & Scott, 2000).

The proponents of family diversity recognize that the family is variable, flexible and has evolved to allow a variety of family structures to meet the changing needs of individuals. They recognize that change is constant and it is not the same as crisis.

> In every generation for more than a century a vocal minority has predicted the death of the family. So far every rumor of its death has been premature. If history teaches us a single lesson about families in modern times, it is this: families and households are variable and flexible, but durable. (The Vanier Institute of the Family, 2000, p. vii).

Thus, while the structure of the family has changed, family ideology remains conservative, valuing the prototypical heterosexual nuclear family of the 1950s (Luxton, 1997). This ideology has caused many diverse families to be "invisible" in discussions of the family, and in mainstream social science research. In order to understand the prevalence and characteristics of these diverse families, more research is needed.

IV. CHARACTERISTICS OF RELATIONSHIPS

What is it about relationships that make them supportive? Because certain types of relationships are "interchangeable" with respect to the value they provide for individuals, many social scientists search for universal characteristics that make relationships satisfying (Argyle, 1986; Kurdek, 1995). Investigating relationship characteristics is important because "it makes little sense to develop programs to 'increase support' without some sense of what aspects of social relationships tend to be health-protective, neutral, or perhaps even noxious" (Heller & Rook, 1997, p. 653). Nevertheless, this is a challenging task because researchers disagree about the "potent" and satisfying characteristics of relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Heller & Rook, 1997; Veniegas & Peplau, 1997). This section considers the value of relationships by examining several relationship characteristics including interdependence, mutuality (power and influence), love, intimacy, commitment and support of dependents as well as the basic human needs they fulfill.

A. Why Are Relationships Valuable?

While most people agree that relationships are valuable, understanding *why* they are valuable depends on who you ask. One researcher asked laypeople to describe the value of relationships, and they responded with such phrases as

> 'would do anything for me,' 'boosts my morale,' 'someone I can confide in,' 'challenges me,' 'helps me understand myself better,' 'lets me relax and be myself.'. . .Their relationship, they said, made them feel important, wanted, needed, accepted, connected, [and] part of something bigger than themselves. . . . (Wright, P. H., 1989, p. 21)

If we try to answer this question based on the theories outlined in the first section of this paper we will get slightly different responses. From the attachment perspective, relationships satisfy basic human needs for emotional support and care (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). The structural-functionalism approach suggests that relationships contribute to the functioning of society (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983). Social exchange theories suggest that relationships are generally more satisfying when the rewards outweigh the costs. A derivative of this theory, the investment theory, recognizes that long-term commitment increases the number of irretrievable investments (i.e., effort, time and other resources) in a relationship. These investments tend to increase the value of maintaining the relationship. Another social psychological theory, equity theory, suggests that relationships are more satisfying when people receive rewards from the relationship that are proportional to the costs (their input or contributions).

1. Social support

Relationships are also valuable because our intimate partners often use their own time and resources to help us reach our own goals and our relationship goals (Wright, P. H., 1989). The variety of resources provided to us by others has been called "social support" (Berg & Piner, 1990). Researchers tend to use three different methods of measuring social support: (1) whether the individual has a social support network (range, size and density of the network), (2) *perceptions* of the availability and quality of support, and/or (3) *actual* support, how the relationships function (Berg & Piner, 1990; Heller & Rook, 1997; Pierce, Sarason & Sarason, 1990; Sarason, Sarason & Gurung, 1997).

The most meaningful social support is usually provided by intimates, including both friends and family (Eichler, 1997; Sarason et al., 1997). Significant others can also provide us with many different types of support. When a loved one provides *instrumental support*, they are volunteering information or advice, or using their abilities or skills to offer assistance. Instrumental support fosters problem solving in situations (Cutrona, Suhr & MacFarlane, 1990). Perhaps the most important kind of social support is *emotional support*. This includes the caring, empathy, love and trust provided by loved ones. These different types of support provide different benefits for individuals (Berg & Piner, 1990).

We also discover the benefits of social support when we examine the consequences of social isolation. For example, Berscheid (1985) describes Stanley Schacter's (1959) research on hermits and prisoners of war who had experienced severe social isolation. Schacter’s findings indicated that “absolute social isolation can be devastatingly painful and produce such varied and dramatic effects as hallucinations, extreme apathy, and, frequently, severe anxiety” (Berscheid, 1985, p. 443). Additionally, people suffer from an absence of social support after the loss of an intimate partner. Such experiences are stressful and can increase one's risk of mental and physical health problems, and can lead to premature death. A lack of support also makes individuals more susceptible to automobile accidents and alcoholism; and may cause a decline in job performance and achievement (Hanna, 2000; Hazan & Shaver, 1994).

B. Interdependence

Some researchers argue that the main defining characteristic of relationships is the amount of interdependence between the individuals (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983; Johnson, 1991; Kelley et al., 1983). People are interdependent when a change that impacts one individual impacts the other. Couples will find it easier to feel connected if they are homogamous, or similar with respect to important characteristics. In fact, the important link between similarity and satisfaction in a relationship has been well-documented (e.g., Berscheid & Lopes, 1997; Weinstock & Rothblum, 1996; Whisman, 1997). For example, partners who have similar philosophies of life will share basic values, beliefs and assumptions about the world, which are key to relationship satisfaction and commitment (Bedard, 1992; Hojjat, 1997; Veroff, Young & Coon, 1997; Whisman, 1997).

Interdependence is beneficial to the well-being of relationships and individuals. People, especially couples, are sometimes so interdependent that their couple identity becomes a part of their self-image (Argyle, 1986). Veroff et al. (1997) reviewed several studies that indicated when couples view themselves as merged rather than completely independent they tend to have happier marriages. Interdependence contributes to the well-being of individuals by providing a sense of closeness and belonging (Bedford & Blieszner, 1997). Researchers also suggest that well-being is enhanced by finding a balance between meeting one's own needs and accommodating to the needs of one's partner. That is, people have a basic need for autonomy that requires differentiation or distancing from one's partner to allow time for independent interests. Some people have found that one way to meet these opposing needs for interdependence and autonomy is to live in separate households but remain closely connected. This has been termed "intimacy at a distance" (Bedford & Blieszner, 1997). Such arrangements are particularly beneficial for people receiving care (e.g., an elderly or disabled family member) because they allow individuals to maintain their independence and privacy but still remain closely connected with their family.

C. Power and Influence

People generally do not equate topics of power and influence with love and romance; however, power is a significant characteristic of relationships. Power imbalances are most clearly understood in heterosexual relationships where many interactions are influenced by gender-role socialization (Crawford & Unger, 2000). Additionally, recent research on gay and lesbian couples provides insight into our understanding of the impact of power in relationships (e.g., Bedard, 1992; Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Huston & Schwartz, 1995).

There are numerous definitions of power reflecting the different social science traditions and different sources of power (e.g., interpersonal or social power). For example, interpersonal power is often understood as the ability to get one's way, or to influence or force another to do something they normally would not do (Davis, Leijenaar, & Oldersma, 1991; Wright, D. E., 1999). When power is analyzed at the societal level, it is understood that certain social groups (e.g., white males) experience institutionalised advantages relative to others (Todd, Friedman, & Steele, 1993). Since power is more likely to impact those who are disadvantaged, it is important to understand power from the perspective of marginalized social groups (e.g., gay and lesbian couples, women and visible minorities). Social power influences interpersonal power because relationships occur within a particular context.

An important goal for most couples is to achieve an equitable relationship (Huston & Schwartz, 1995; Matlin, 2000). The idea of equity means that people want to get out of their relationships what they put into them. "Most people assume close personal relationships must be fair or equitable; that is, each party to the relationship must contribute and receive *roughly* the same" (LaFollette, 1996, p. 136). The social exchange theory described earlier is helpful for understanding why equity is an important goal, and how the meaning of "the same" differs for every couple. This theory suggests that people attempt to maximize rewards and minimize costs in a relationship. In a casual relationship, people expect equity—when they give something to an acquaintance they will get something in return. In a close personal relationship, however, it is harmful to "keep score" or expect immediate reciprocity. People involved in close relationships expect that an intimate will respond to their *needs*, and that the relationships should be equitable in the long run, but they do not expect it to operate as a direct exchange (LaFollette, 1996). Equity relies on *perceptions,* which explains why some people remain in relationships that may not appear equitable to an observer. To determine whether a relationship is rewarding, an individual may also consider alternatives to the relationship. For example, partners may compare their relationship with the relationships of similar others (i.e., their friends), and consider what their relationship was like at other points in time (e.g., 5 years ago and 10 years ago). If alternatives appear grim and/or the current relationship has improved, then their relationship may be evaluated as rewarding.

1. Characteristics of unequal relationships

Historically, women's economic dependence on men made them ". . .captives in their own marriages. They were fortunate if their marriages were good, but they had no viable options if they were not" (Vannoy-Hiller & Philliber, 1989, p. 85). Today, most heterosexual relationships are not egalitarian (Baker, 1996b; Matlin, 2000; Nett, 1993; Vannoy-Hiller & Philliber, 1989). Crawford and Unger (2000) suggest that "within marriage, inequality is so much the norm that it may be invisible" (p. 345). This has important implications for heterosexual relationships, where men tend to benefit more from marriage relative to women (Argyle, 1986; Bedford & Blieszner, 1997).

Social norms and the disparity of resources between women and men influence the distribution of power in heterosexual relationships. Men tend to be more powerful in relationships because they generally have access to more sources of power (Crawford & Unger, 2000; Huston, 1983; Matlin, 2000). They tend to earn more money, have higher status or prestigious jobs, and higher levels of education relative to women (Crawford & Unger, 2000). Studies of decision-making in families indicate that those with greater personal resources such as higher income, more education, and higher social status, were more likely to make important decisions (Baker, 1996b). Income is also an important factor because many women still depend on their husbands for financial support (Nett, 1993), and wives who have no paid employment tend to have the least power of all women in heterosexual relationships (Crawford & Unger, 2000). Power imbalances also result from disparities in unpaid work. Housework and caring for the family is generally perceived as a woman's responsibility (Nett, 1993; Vannoy-Hiller & Philliber, 1989). Since most women do unpaid work after a full day of paid work it has often been considered a *second shift* (Crawford & Unger, 2000; Matlin, 2000). Finally, disparities also exist because, in general, women are more skilled at listening and communicating, and they tend to provide more social support to others than they receive. Since women are the primary source of social support to many people, competing demands may cause significant stress in their lives (Crawford & Unger, 2000; Sarason et al., 1997).

Social exchange theory suggests that those with the most resources in a relationship (i.e., men who have more money, status, and knowledge), will have the most influence. Thus, this theory predicts that when individuals in a couple have equal resources, the distribution of power in their relationship will be equal. Contrary to this theory, research has shown that even when women earn more than men, relationships remain unequal, with women continuing to have more responsibility for nurturing the family and doing the housework (Crawford & Unger, 2000). Such findings can be explained by the fact that traditional beliefs and social norms favour men, and their influences are strong. As a result, Bedard (1992) argues that

> all the major institutions of our society are geared toward the traditional patriarchal family—with a working father and a mother who stays at home. So, even though there is considerable pressure for equality coming from women, and many men say they favor it too, the egalitarian ideal of shared social and economic power and shared domestic labor remains difficult to achieve. (p. 42)

Thus, resources and social norms are both important explanations of inequity in heterosexual relationships.

(a) inequity and well-being

Although disparities are expected to occur from day to day within a relationship, it is not surprising that enduring power imbalances are problematic for relationships. Generally, those with less social and interpersonal power (often women) tend to find unequal relationships frustrating (Larson, 1976b) and less satisfying (Bedard, 1992; Crawford & Unger, 2000; Larson, 1976b; Veniegas & Peplau, 1997; Veroff, Young & Coon, 1997). Those with power are more likely to dissolve the relationship, and such relationships are generally not exclusive or lasting (Huston & Schwartz, 1995; Larson, 1976b). Power imbalances tend to cause destructive conflict (Huston & Schwartz, 1995) and may cause the relationship to be perceived as “deficient” (Veniegas & Peplau, 1997). Oppressive relationships are also damaging to one’s self-concept and do not meet an individual’s basic needs (Koggel, 1998). For example, power imbalances that lead to abuse and violence do not meet an individual’s basic needs for security and safety.

At its extreme, power imbalances can lead to physical and emotional abuse. Those who are in positions of power are capable of inflicting harm, thus depriving others of basic needs for safety (Huston, 1983). Research in the 1970s and 1980s raised awareness that intimate relationships and the family were not a safe haven from violence (Baker, 1996b; Bedard, 1992). “The concept of the family as sacred and private has enabled physical, sexual, and emotional abuses of family members, especially women, children, and the elderly, to go on without acknowledgement or retribution” (Weinstock & Rothblum, 1996, p. 11). In fact, women are more likely to be abused by a person they know than by a complete stranger (Crawford & Unger, 2000).

The social exchange (or equity) theory best explains why inequity is related to dissatisfaction in a relationship. Our *expectations* about relationships are key. We generally expect relationships to be rewarding, caring and reciprocal over the long term. If an intimate partner is not contributing equitably to a relationship we might perceive that person as uncaring or unloving and the relationship as no longer rewarding (LaFollette, 1996). Furthermore, if our expectations are not met we may feel like we have been deceived (Larson, 1976b). Thus, we may be unsatisfied and/or want to end the relationship.

There are several reasons why unequal relationships may not end. First, inequality is so normative in our culture and in marriage that it may be invisible (Crawford & Unger, 2000). Second, people do not tend to “keep score” within an intimate relationship regarding who has made what contributions. In fact, if such score keeping occurs, it can be detrimental. Thus, inequity may be difficult to identify. Third, intimate partners sometimes subordinate their own interests for the sake of their partners’. For example, if one partner is too busy to do his share of the weekly housework because of a busy work schedule the other might temporarily take over to allow him time to do his work. By taking this action, the other partner is still promoting her own interests because she is promoting the interests of her intimate partner (LaFollette, 1996). In other words, inequity is not always identified, nor is it always perceived as a problem partly because intimate partners have interdependent interests.

2. Characteristics of egalitarian relationships

Attachment theory suggests that humans have basic evolutionary needs to feel protected, loved, safe and secure. We try to meet these needs as infants and also as adults. According to this theory, the type of response provided by the primary caregiver early in life can influence relationship behaviours in adulthood. Research has shown that the strongest adult relationships develop when one's partner is sensitive, responsive, nonthreatening and trustworthy (Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Koski & Shaver, 1997; Zeifman & Hazan, 1997).

While relationships based on dominance and subordination can be destructive and abusive, people in egalitarian relationships tend to use effective conflict resolution skills and, as a result, such relationships are less violent (Bedard, 1992). Egalitarian relationships are also based on sharing, caring, trust, friendship, appreciation and mutual respect (Bedard, 1992; Crawford & Unger, 2000; Matlin, 2000). Such relationships are also more common when individuals are equally involved in the relationship and have less traditional attitudes toward the assignment of gender roles. This might mean that both partners work outside the home for pay and that domestic chores would be " . . .allocated by interest and ability, not because certain jobs are ‘women’s work’ and others are ‘men’s work’” (Crawford & Unger, 2000, p. 315). Individuals in an egalitarian relationship are also more likely than other couples to be similar with respect to financial, educational and occupational status (Vannoy-Hiller & Philliber, 1989).

Same-sex relationships, especially those formed by two women, tend to be more egalitarian than heterosexual relationships (Bedard, 1992; Kurdek, 1995; O’Brien & Goldberg, 2000). This is probably because most gay and lesbian couples *do not* adhere to traditional heterosexual scripts or masculine-feminine role-playing. “Same-sex couples cannot assign the breadwinner role on the basis of gender. . .” (Crawford & Unger, 2000, p. 326). Instead, they tend to negotiate issues regarding the division of labour, communication and power, which leads to more equitable decisions that are not restricted to a normative or traditional script (Huston & Schwartz, 1995).

Research suggests that the balance of power determines the quality of close personal relationships. Veniegas and Peplau (1997) found that males and females in egalitarian relationships feel their relationships are closer, have a higher degree of self-disclosure, and are more rewarding and loving as compared with those in unequal relationships. Equal relationships also tend to be more satisfying (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Veniegas and Peplau, 1997).

While more couples today recognize the value of endorsing equality, two social forces make it difficult to develop egalitarian relationships--the gender gap in wages and in the responsibility for household chores and childrearing (Bedard, 1992). Women are still paid less for doing the same work, and continue to do a disproportionate share of family labour including household chores and caregiving. Until these social inequities are addressed change is unlikely. In order to clearly understand the impact of power imbalances we must go beyond an analysis at the interpersonal level to consider the impact of societal oppression. For example, any policy supporting relationships should not reinforce traditional patriarchal values that oppress women. “If women are to share in the same rights and obligations as men, family forms must be revised so that women are no more and no less constrained than men by taking care of the young and the old” (Vannoy-Hiller & Philliber, 1989, p. 134).

D. Love

Love is a very important characteristic of relationships. People have their own ideas about love; after all, it is a common theme in popular media. But how do social scientists understand love? “At present, the scientific usage of *love* is rooted in common usage” (Kelley, 1983, p. 271). Loving relationships are exemplified by understanding, acceptance, unconditional positive regard, needing, caring, trust, sensitivity and mutual support (Kelley, 1983; LaFollette, 1996). Love can be examined as a disposition (attitude toward someone), thoughts, feelings (e.g., feeling passionate) and behaviours (e.g., verbal and physical demonstrations of affection) (Rubin, 1974; Kelley, 1983). Two important components of love that will be discussed later are intimacy and commitment. Love is interpersonal, experienced between those in relationships: family members (e.g., parents and children, and siblings), same-sex and opposite-sex couples and friends. Since love is influenced by individual attitudes and can occur in a variety of relationships there are many types of love including romantic, passionate, companionate, and altruistic.

There are two general theories that were discussed earlier (in Section II) that can be applied to our understanding of love—attachment theory and symbolic interactionism. The attachment theory is an evolutionary approach that suggests love is a strong emotional attachment and is expected to be universal (Goode, 1974; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1997; Rubin, 1974; Schwartz & Scott, 2000). However, we soon learn that love is socially constructed when we begin to study it in different cultures. Socialization processes (i.e., family, teachers, the media and significant others) teach us about the meaning of love and how we are supposed to behave when we are in love. Moreover, many anthropologists argue that our conception of romantic love is purely a Western phenomenon. For example, in the West, we assume that love is a common precursor to marriage, but researchers have found that in the majority of the world, marriages are most often arranged by family members (Goode, 1974).

1. Types of love

Companionate and passionate love are the types of love most often described in the literature (Whisman, 1997; Wright, D. E., 1999). The *companionate* perspective describes love by such characteristics as affection, trust, security, friendship, communication, happiness and mutual involvement. This type of love emphasizes equity, suggesting that people will remain in a relationship as long as they are being loved in return. Companionate love generally develops slowly and grows deeper over time (Larson, 1976b; Wright, D. E., 1999). *Passionate love*, on the other hand, generally develops very quickly and declines over time. Motivational needs like sex are dominant. It is characterized by strong, intense feelings of arousal, preoccupation with thoughts of one's lover, intense absorption, and sometimes mixed emotions. This is sometimes called romantic love (Kelley, 1983). In other words, love was originally conceptualized as having two main elements—sexual desire and tenderness (Goode, 1974). Researchers began to see this as too limiting to capture the multidimensional nature of love, and began to investigate six love styles.

According to Hendrick and Hendrick (1997) there are six main styles of love that refer to the Greek concepts of *eros*, *storge*, *ludus*, *pragma*, *mania* and *agape*. *Eros* is a passionate love, characterized by intense emotion, a strong physical component, and self-disclosure. *Storge* is a companionate love based on friendship that develops over a long period of time. *Ludus*, or game-playing love, is insincere and characterized by a lack of commitment. *Pragma* is a practical, rational love style that emphasizes mutual trust, tolerance, caring. This is a style that evolves from long-term satisfying relationships. *Mania* is similar to romantic love, characterized by strong emotions that are often contradictory and possessive. *Agape*, or altruistic love, occurs when an individual gives more than he/she receives from a relationship. This is a caring, selfless love style exemplified by parents' relationships with their children.

Close relationships may be characterized by a blending of these love styles or by one style at different stages of a relationship. Research has found that these love styles are related to satisfaction and well-being in romantic relationships between adults. "Whereas we might expect the roaring fires of passionate love to be related to satisfaction at the beginning of a romantic relationship, the steadily glowing embers of companionate love might be expected to relate to satisfaction in a long-term, committed relationship" (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1997, p. 62). More specifically, these researchers found that because *ludus* is characterized by deception and the avoidance of intimacy, it has been *negatively* related to satisfaction in several studies. *Eros*, on the other hand, is the strongest predictor of satisfaction. This is likely because *eros* represents a passionate and communicative style that matches Western ideals of love.

2. Basic needs fulfilled by love

Through experiences in loving, close relationships we develop mental models of the self and our relationships. "The memories, beliefs, and expectations embodied in those models influence feelings of self-esteem, optimism, trust, and fear of violation or abandonment" (Koski & Shaver, 1997, p. 47). That is why children who are deprived of love never learn to love themselves (Garrett, 1989). When we are valued by others and people respond to us as "unique, genuine, and irreplaceable" (Wright, P. H., 1989, p. 25), this sense of individuality benefits our self-esteem and feelings of self-worth. Moreover, relationships are rewarding because our intimates recognize our valuable attributes (self-affirmation value), and through their support and encouragement, we view ourselves as competent and worthwhile. Thus, loving relationships foster a sense of self-esteem, which is a core need for humans (Young & Gluhoski, 1997).

E. Intimacy

Two of the major components of love are intimacy and commitment (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1997; Wright, D. E., 1999). The first component, *intimacy* influences the development of love, and is related to the quality of a relationship. Intimacy is time consuming to develop and requires *commitment*, which will be discussed in detail later.

Intimacy is a very important characteristic of relationships. When people think of "intimacy" they generally think of sexual intimacy or closeness and warmth. Intimacy is not restricted to sexual or marriage-like relationships, and it is also a characteristic of close friendships and family relationships. It "refers to feelings of closeness, bondedness, and connection" (Wright, D. E., 1999, p. 184). Intimacy can also imply

> a certain exclusive and consistent long-term interaction between the intimate parties in order that the relationship attain a certain depth and shared knowledge and trust. The realization and maintenance of an intimate relationship thus entails certain duties of loyalty, exclusiveness, and extensive interaction not morally demanded in our interactions with strangers. (Garrett, 1989, p. 144)

The way we communicate, both verbally (e.g., disclosing personal information) and nonverbally (e.g., crying in front of someone and shared experiences), also influences the development of intimate relationships (LaFollette, 1996).

Intimacy has been described as a developmental aspect of relationships, that relationships exist on a continuum of superficiality to intimacy. Relationships can become progressively more intimate over time as they transform from a relationship based on exchange to a communal relationship. Exchange relationships are characterized by the desire to maximize one's own benefits while minimizing costs. The goals of a communal relationship, on the other hand, are to provide benefits to the other individual in the relationship. Thus, in a communal relationship there is no need to "keep score" of the rewards and benefits.

According to D. E. Wright (1999), the *social penetration model* takes an incremental approach to explaining the development of relationships from less intimate to more intimate. This approach suggests that we can know a wide range of aspects about an individual or only a few (breadth), and we can know superficial or "deep" aspects of an individual (depth). Deeper aspects of the self refer to core aspects of one's personality and involve personal information that is rarely shared with others. As we progressively know someone across a wide breadth of topics and as "deeper" aspects of the self are revealed, a relationship becomes more intimate. Garrett (1989) argues that when people reveal intimate details they make themselves vulnerable to their partner because the information could be damaging to one's self-esteem or could later be used against them.

The timing and reciprocity of self-disclosures are also crucial. If one partner discloses more than another partner, or if information is disclosed "too soon" or "too late," such imbalances may jeopardize the development of an intimate relationship. Later research on this model recognized that relationships do not always develop in one direction. Sometimes people reveal intimate details to strangers; and intimacy may fluctuate within a relationship, with partners feeling very close at times and distant at others (Altman, Vinsel & Brown, 1981, cited in Alcock et al., 1998).

Intimacy is a significant correlate of satisfaction in close personal relationships (Koski & Shaver, 1997), but it is sometimes difficult to establish. Some people fear that intimate, open communication will result in negative outcomes (La Gaipa, 1990). Also, if there is a discrepancy between expected and actual intimate contact people may feel lonely within an intimate relationship (Hanna, 2000). In order for intimate relationships to be satisfying and beneficial to the well-being of individuals, self-disclosures must be reciprocal, genuine and honest—". . . a dishonest revelation is a contradiction in terms" (Graham & LaFollette, 1989, p. 171). Self-disclosure also requires sensitivity and trust so that the information being shared is not hurtful or perceived as an attack (Olson & DeFrain, 1994).

1. Basic needs fulfilled by intimacy

Several basic needs are fulfilled by intimate relationships. One psychologist, Erik Erikson, postulated the importance of intimacy in a young adult's life. He suggested that in order for adults to become fully matured they must resolve a psychosocial crisis of intimacy versus isolation. If intimacy is not established, an adult risks becoming isolated and lonely (Olson & DeFrain, 1994).

Additionally, a relational view of the self suggests that our self-concepts and identity are shaped by our relationships (Koggel, 1998). Intimate relationships help individuals understand and know themselves better--openly sharing information about oneself promotes self-knowledge. Additionally, constructive criticism from close friends or family members can help us understand and better ourselves. Since the development of a close relationship requires traits like honesty and trust, the process helps us to develop moral character (LaFollette, 1996). Relationships that are more intimate tend to be more committed and long-lasting. Partners who are intimate feel close to one another and tend to be more satisfied with their relationship.

F. Commitment

“Most researchers have found that commitment is a key factor in any intimate, emotionally satisfying, and meaningful relationship” (Schwartz & Scott, 2000, p. 222). In our culture, developing a long-term relationship is the ideal for many people, and the desire to commit to a relationship generally leads to marriage (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1997). But not all people are legally able, nor do they want to marry. Since commitment is not the same as marriage, what is it? “A person committed to a relationship is expected to stay in that relationship, ‘through thick and thin,’ ‘for better and for worse,’ and so on” (Kelley, 1983, p. 287). Commitment has also been investigated as behaviours or actions (‘pro-relationship’ activities such as derogating alternatives), an emotional state (feeling obliged, feeling attached), and a disposition (stable commitment to one person) (e.g., Kelley, 1983; Rusbult, Yovetich, & Verette, 1996). It is more than just persistence, “commitment involves such things as decision, investment, and risk” (Wright, D. E., 1999, p. 233). Several aspects of commitment and its consequences for individuals and relationships will be examined.

1. Psychological theories of relationship commitment

(a) cognitive dissonance

We can turn to several psychological models of relationship commitment to understand what keeps relationships together and what causes them to dissolve. The psychological theory of cognitive dissonance proposed by Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) has been applied to many types of behaviour. In general it argues that we want our actions and beliefs to be congruent—cognitive consistency. If they are not, cognitive dissonance arises, which causes anxiety, tension and arousal. We are motivated to reduce this anxiety by changing our attitudes and/or behaviours to ensure that they correspond. This theory would explain commitment by recognizing that certain behaviours can foster attitudes of commitment. For example, if someone had *negative attitudes* toward commitment but then publicly committed to stay with another person "forever" (e.g., made public statements of commitment in a marriage ceremony) without being coerced, or without receiving large external inducements (e.g., money or status), this would cause anxiety and tension because of the dissonance between the individual's attitudes and behaviours. Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that the tension would lead to attitude change that favoured commitment to ensure congruence between the individual's behaviours and attitudes.

(b) social exchange theory

When the social exchange theory is applied to commitment it "proposes that dependence on a relationship is a function of: (a) satisfaction with that relationship, or feelings of attraction to one's partner and relationship; and (b) comparison level for alternatives, or feelings of attraction to the best available alternative" (Rusbult, 1991, p.

152). Other researchers (e.g., Kelly, 1983) suggest that in order to predict relationship stability, it is important to know both the “pros” and “cons” of the relationship. The “pros,” or what causes people to remain in a relationship, may be positive (e.g., love and positive emotions) or negative (e.g., financial and emotional costs of leaving). The “cons,” which may lead to the dissolution of a relationship, may include such factors as the anxiety caused by remaining in the relationship, or perceiving alternatives to the relationship as very attractive. A relationship will be stable if “. . .over time and situations, the pros outweigh the cons” (Kelley, 1983, p. 289).

(c) Rusbult’s investment model

Caryl Rusbult developed a model of commitment known as the *investment model.* This is a derivative of the social exchange theory, but adds the concepts of investment and long-term commitment. It can also explain what happens when dependence exists in a relationship (Berscheid & Lopes, 1997). Commitment involves a consideration of the rewards and non-recoverable investments in the relationship, and the presence or absence of other desirable alternatives (Wright, D. E.,1999). Over time, we can invest a great deal in a relationship: time, emotional experiences, memories, effort, self-disclosure, possessions, and other resources. Investments are not simply rewards and costs because they are more difficult to remove from the relationship. The longer we remain in the relationship the more costly it becomes to dissolve it. This may cause an individual to perceive the relationship as more valuable, which increases commitment. “The more we invest [in a relationship], the more we stand to lose if the relationship fails” (Wright, D. E., 1999, p. 239). This investment model can be applied to diverse relationships, including friendships, dating relationships, marriages, and same-sex couples.

(d) Johnson's (1991) model of commitment

Instead of viewing commitment as a single phenomenon, Johnson (1991) perceives it as three distinct but related experiences ". . .(1) personal commitment, the feeling that one *wants to* continue the relationship; (2) moral commitment, the feeling that one *ought to* continue it; and (3) structural commitment, the feeling that one *has to* continue it" (italics added, Johnson, 1991, p. 119). *Personal commitment* is related to internal motivation to remain in the relationship, such as personal dedication or beliefs to continue the relationship. This can involve attitudes toward the relationship and the partner (Hobart, 1996; Johnson, 1985). People will also be more committed to a relationship if part of their self-concept or identity involves their relationship (relational identity or interdependence) (Johnson, 1991). *Moral commitment* involves living up to one's own values of what is right and wrong, or living up to the values imposed by our culture. People may also feel a sense of a personal contractual obligation to their partner if they made a promise, or vowed to maintain the relationship (Johnson, 1991).

Third, *structural commitment* focuses on external *constraints* that cause people to feel "locked" into a relationship. If personal and moral commitments are low, there are four components of structural commitment that may become important. One structural factor related to commitment is *irretrievable investments*. The longer an individual has been involved in a relationship, the more time and other resources (money, energy, and emotional investment) are invested in the relationship. If the relationship is rewarding, people are likely to consider these investments time well spent. People may be reluctant to separate if they feel they will lose these investments when the relationship ends (Johnson, 1991). Second, relationships develop within a social network of family and friends who may also have feelings about the prospect of a relationship dissolving. *Social reactions* tend to vary depending on the importance and value placed on the relationship by others. For example, people in one's social network would not react the same way to the dissolution of a casual dating relationship as they would to a divorce involving children. People in one's social network may pressure individuals to remain in a relationship even when they do not feel personally or morally committed. Third, the *difficulty of termination procedures* also influences structural commitment. More serious relationships are typically more difficult to dissolve. There may be legal procedures (e.g., divorce), hurt feelings, and a need to divide personal possessions, which may cause a break-up to be complex and costly in terms of time and resources. Perceived difficulties associated with dissolving a relationship may serve as a barrier to ending the relationship. Fourth, *alternatives* to the relationship may also serve as a barrier to dissolution.

While social exchange theories often focus on the perception of attractive alternatives to the relationship, Johnson's (1991) model focuses on how unattractive alternatives may prevent a relationship from ending. For example, most women suffer a decrease in their financial status, and many women end up in poverty after a divorce (Huston & Schwartz, 1995). Such alternatives may prevent divorce even when a woman is not personally or morally committed to the relationship.

In sum, “personal commitment stems from one’s own attitudes and self-concept, moral commitment from one’s own value system and sense of right and wrong; structural commitment stems from one’s assessment of the costs of termination that will be imposed by the environment” (Johnson, 1991, p. 119). Personal commitment involves such things as attraction to one’s partner and the relationship and a sense of interdependence (couple identity). Moral commitment involves feelings of obligation to the relationship, personal obligations to one’s partner, and general feelings that one should think and behave consistently for important matters. According to Johnson, structural commitment is experienced as constraints to continue the relationship. Components of structural commitment include the perception of alternatives, social pressure to continue the relationship, the difficulty of termination procedures and perceptions of irretrievable investments. Thus, this model recognizes the influences of both personal choice and cultural influences on commitment.

2. Factors related to commitment

Based on these models of commitment, several factors that encourage commitment can be identified. Private or public pledges to remain in a relationship encourage commitment. Public events, such as a religious marriage ceremony, are seen by some as a sacred commitment (Schwartz & Scott, 2000). Religion encourages or constrains some people to remain married. However, among Canadians, religious attendance has declined since the 1940s (Clark, 1998).This suggests that religion may be playing less of a role in relationships. Nevertheless, some continue to view marriage as a legal or personal contract to remain in the relationship. Both formal (church) and informal (family and friends) social systems may be brought together during a public commitment ceremony (Kelley, 1983). Additionally, when couples believe marriage is a long-term commitment, research has found the relationship will last longer. Whether couples marry or not, they may verbally pledge commitment or behave in such a way that implies commitment.

Second, extraneous benefits such as staying together “for the children” will also keep a relationship together (Kelley, 1983). Third, the potential loss of reputation that may come with dissolving a relationship is a barrier to ending it. Fourth, intimacy, and the reduced privacy that comes with living with someone, may enhance a sense of connected identity between partners (interdependence) which encourages commitment (Kelley, 1983). Fifth, a concern for one’s partner is also related to commitment (Wright, D. E., 1999). Individuals are also more likely to be committed when the relationship is satisfying, there are few alternatives, and they have made many investments that are not retrievable (e.g., time, money and effort). Since irretrievable investments increase in long-term relationships, the length of the relationship is also related to commitment (Berscheid & Lopes, 1997). Thus, many factors in addition to love and satisfaction contribute to commitment.

3. Couples and commitment

(a) same-sex couples

There are many misconceptions regarding commitment in same-sex and common-law relationships. This section attempts to address some of these erroneous beliefs. People continue to judge the “quality” or “success” of relationships by how long they last, even though the research on commitment shows this is not appropriate.

Perhaps length is equated with commitment because it is relatively simple to assess, and does not require asking individuals for information that is highly sensitive and personal. Some studies have found that gay and lesbian relationships may not last as long as heterosexual married relationships (e.g., Huston & Schwartz, 1995). People may use this type of information to argue that it is “proof” that same sex relationships are somehow “problematic,” promiscuous or not committed.

Despite social pressures against same-sex couples, and few barriers to dissolving their relationships, lesbians and gay men form long-lasting, committed, monogamous relationships (Huston & Schwartz, 1995; Kurdek, 1995; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986b; O’Brien & Goldberg, 2000; Peplau, 1994). “Thus, being part of a couple is integral to the lives of many lesbians and gay men” (Kurdek, 1995, p. 243). Moreover, even if a gay or lesbian relationship does not last as long as a heterosexual marriage, this *does not* mean there is a problem with same-sex relationships. Perhaps the problem is with our society, which does not fully support same-sex relationships. For example, lesbian and gay couples report that few relatives support their relationships (Huston & Schwartz, 1995).

Another detrimental consequence of anti-gay prejudice is that it presents many barriers for same sex couples to come “out of the closet” with their relationships. Not being “out” influences one’s psychological well-being. If intimate partners have different values about openly celebrating their relationship in the community, this can create pressure and stress, impacting the stability and quality of the relationship (Huston & Schwartz, 1995). Moreover, those who remain “closeted” are usually unable to receive support and validation from lesbian and gay communities (D'Augelli & Garnets, 1995). Thus, public support would benefit the well-being of individuals and couples involved in same-sex relationships.

Some social changes have also promoted relationship stability for same-sex couples. The aging population and greater awareness of the impact of AIDS have created a climate that encourages more gay men to remain in exclusive committed relationships (Bedard, 1992; Huston & Schwartz, 1995). Moreover, lesbian women tend to have fewer alternatives to their relationships because most lesbian women are partnered (Huston & Schwartz, 1995). As same-sex relationships become more socially accepted and more couples come "out of the closet," they provide role models of long-term, satisfying relationships (Huston & Schwartz, 1995). Additionally, in other countries where *domestic partnerships* are legalized, such relationships are stable and committed (Bedard, 1992).

(b) common-law couples

Findings regarding the impact of cohabitation on commitment are inconsistent. Some researchers have found that common-law partnerships are more likely to dissolve than marriages, and that people who cohabit before marriage have a greater likelihood of divorce (Cunningham & Antill, 1995). Other researchers have found that cohabiting with one's spouse before marriage increases the likelihood that a couple will remain married (White, 1987).

Researchers who suggest that pre-marital cohabitation is related to divorce have offered one qualification to this finding. They recognize that the current data is unable to tell us whether the divorce rate would be even higher without pre-marital cohabitation, that is, whether “the breakup of an unhappy cohabitation prevents the unhappy marriage that might end in divorce” (Cunningham & Antill, 1995, p. 163).

One reason why cohabitants may dissolve their relationships more often than married or gay and lesbian couples is that they tend to make less of an investment and to perceive the fewest barriers to leaving a relationship (Cunningham & Antill, 1995). Another explanation is provided by what is called the *selectivity or unconventionality hypothesis*. This suggests that those who cohabit tend to differ from those who marry, which may predispose them to a higher divorce rate. For example, wives who have cohabited tend to express more individualistic values and values that are more accepting of divorce. Additional support for this hypothesis comes from research in countries where cohabitation is becoming conventional. Where cohabitation is socially acceptable, differences in the rate of relationship dissolution between married versus common-law couples is decreasing, and in some cases reversing (i.e., couples who have cohabited stay together longer) (Cunningham & Antill, 1995, p. 165).

Other research suggests that pre-marital cohabitation increases the likelihood that a couple will remain married. White (1987) suggests that this finding is independent of the individual’s age at marriage. In other words, this finding cannot simply be explained by the idea that those who cohabit first are likely older and more mature when they marry than those who do not cohabit. It may be that cohabitation provides a kind of “trial marriage” where individuals can learn and practice their gender roles and negotiate their expectations (e.g., consider issues regarding household division of labour). Cohabitors in the study by White were also more highly educated than noncohabitors, suggesting that higher education may partly explain their longer marriages. Furthermore, the increasing popularity of cohabitation and social norms associated with it, suggests that it may be a new stage in family development between dating and marriage. For example,

> cohabitation may be a normative means to delay childbearing, since few parents or others would pressure a cohabiting woman to have children but would direct more pressure toward her getting married as the next normative step. (White, 1987, p. 646)

Thus, cohabitation may allow individuals, particularly females, the opportunity to have an intimate, committed relationship while completing school and starting a career, without pressure to adhere to the normative roles associated with marriage (e.g., household labour and childbearing).

G. Supporting Dependents

Some close relationships are characterized by the support of dependents—children, elderly parents, disabled relatives or other family members or close friends. Family members are usually the first people to provide care for the elderly or people with special needs. In fact, nine out of ten individuals who have special needs or disabilities rely on family members for assistance (The Vanier Institute of the Family, 2000). Although there are many types of dependent relationships, and several issues that could be considered, this section examines issues related to providing care for children and the elderly.

Many people choose to act as caregivers for others because it can be very gratifying. “Caring is something we do. If we care for people then we listen, support, and help them; we laugh and cry with them; we intertwine our lives” (LaFollette, 1996, p. 19). Caregivers can provide the basic necessities for life, and can also provide emotional and financial support. While providing care can be rewarding, it often brings with it certain costs, particularly to women who are the primary caregivers in our culture.

> Women—wives, daughters, daughters-in-law and granddaughters—provide most of the informal care to their relatives. They often do so at considerable cost to their jobs and careers, their own physical and emotional health, and their other family relationships and responsibilities. (The Vanier Institute of the Family, 2000, p. 177)

Some of the benefits and detrimental consequences of supporting dependents will be considered in this section.

1. Caring for children

The presence of children can have a large impact on a relationship. While raising children can be rewarding, research has found that it can also reduce the quality of relationships between heterosexual couples. Some parents find it stressful to adjust to reduced time to focus on the relationship, cope with additional economic stressors, find satisfactory childcare arrangements, respond to childhood illnesses, negotiate the division of labour (e.g., changing diapers, feeding), and agree on parenting issues (Vannoy-Hiller & Philliber, 1989).

(a) raising children

There are those who believe that the traditional nuclear family, with a husband who is the sole financial provider and a wife who remains at home, is best suited to care for children. One proponent of this belief is David Popenoe (e.g., 1993). He also argues that social changes such as women's economic independence, and the increased divorce rate, threaten the family. Other researchers, including Popenoe, argue that a mother's paid employment is a problem for children. Research does not confirm this common perception. In general, many studies indicate that when children receive quality day care or alternative forms of care, they experience neutral or positive consequences (Crawford & Unger, 2000; Matlin, 2000; Schwartz & Scott, 2000). For children in low-income homes, whose families may not have the resources to provide an enriched environment, day care can provide opportunities for intellectual and social development (Scarr, Phillips, & McCartney, 1990 as cited in Crawford & Unger, 2000). Additionally, a mother who works for pay provides a role model of a competent woman to her children. Consequently, this fosters daughters who are high achievers, independent and confident, and both sons and daughters who endorse fewer gender-stereotypes and are more egalitarian (Crawford & Unger, 2000; Matlin, 2000).

Other findings suggest that the lack of readily available, convenient, flexible, affordable, childcare is a much greater problem than maternal employment. For example, if child care systems were available *when* and *where* they were needed, 24 hours a day, for a flexible number of days, this would provide many advantages for families, such as respite for parents who were tired or ill (Bernardes, 1997). Such care would also help strengthen families by reducing the stress of caregiving, and would help improve the long-term social and educational achievements of some children.

(b) adult children

As children grow into young adults, families face new challenges. Another social trend impacting Canadians is the fact that adult children remain dependent on their parents longer than they were in the past. When adult children return home to live with their parents, research and public opinion tend to view this “refilled nest” phenomenon as an indication of “pathological” family functioning where “everybody loses” (Mitchell, 2000). Mitchell argues against the idea of a crisis by summarizing research from the 1995 General Social Survey and a Vancouver study entitled the “Cluttered Nest Project.” These studies found that adult children returned home for school-related (e.g., recently graduated, summer break, they obtained degree, and/or quit school) and financial reasons. A small percent returned because of their psychological health (9%), physical health or disability (4%), or because their parents needed assistance (4%).

Mitchell found that when adult children returned home it was not necessarily stressful for the family. The majority of both the parents (91%) and the children (78%) found these living arrangements satisfactory, albeit for slightly different reasons. Parents tended to be most satisfied when their children were more autonomous and when exchanges of support were reciprocal. The receipt of financial support, companionship, benefiting from the “comforts of home,” safety and security, were among the main reasons that children found it satisfying to return home. Both the adult children and parents suggested that the main challenge of this arrangement was respecting each other’s privacy. Thus, these studies on the “refilled nest” suggests that rather than being a “crisis,” most families find it is a generally positive experience (Mitchell, 2000).

However, since this is a relatively new phenomenon, more research is needed on the challenges faced by individuals adapting to this type of family arrangement.

2. Caring for elderly parents

Since the population is aging, an increasing number of elderly people are in need of support and care (La Gaipa, 1990). A common perception is that elderly are primarily receiving care from their middle-aged children. It is believed that this cohort of middle-aged adults are facing the challenges of meeting their own needs, while simultaneously assisting their adult children and aging parents. Because they are considered to be sandwiched between these intergenerational demands, they have been called the *sandwich generation* (Martin-Matthews, 2000; Schwartz & Scott, 2000). This type of research tends to focus on the needs of the elderly and emphasizes the burden experienced by caring for older adults.

The concept of the sandwich generation has been described as “one of the more pervasive of the current misunderstandings of families and aging. . .” (Martin-Matthews, 2000, p. 342). In fact, only 3 to 8 % of Canadian families experience being “caught in the middle” (Mitchell, 2000). There are several reasons to explain this trend. First, many elderly people do not have children who are able to care for them in their old age because of the high rates of childlessness and low fertility rates of the first two decades of this century. For those widows with children, most prefer to live alone because it allows them to maintain their privacy, independence, and control over decisions that affect their lives (Bess, 1999).Thus, the relationship with their children is characterized by the provision of emotional or economic support between different households, with most families living in the same city or within a one-hour drive. Daughters are more likely than sons to provide support and maintain contact with their parents. Parents tend to provide more aid to children than vice versa, and the assistance generally comes in the form of childcare and financial support (Martin-Matthews, 2000). As a result, the majority of the elderly function quite well and tend to live independently.

So who is caring for Canada's aging population? Martin-Matthews (2000) suggests that it is typically someone from the same generation, usually a spouse, who is identified as the primary caregiver. However, in one study, 15% of the respondents identified a non-relative (e.g., other peers, siblings, friends and neighbours). Nevertheless, toward the end of their life, it is typical for elderly women to be widowed and men to be married. Thus, it is mostly elderly women who are caring for their spouses (Martin-Matthews, 2000; The Vanier Institute of the Family, 2000). In some cases, a woman's partner becomes so ill that he has to be institutionalized, and some researchers have called this "quasi widowhood" or "married widowhood."

3. Consequences of caregiving

While there are many physical and psychological health benefits of receiving care and support, there are also several challenges that family members face. The psychological, emotional and physical costs associated with providing support can impact both the caregiver and the dependent adult. However, the impact of caregiving is mediated by the quality of the relationship, the competence of the caregiver and the availability of a social support network for both the caregiver and the dependent adult. These issues will be examined in more detail.

(a) basic needs fulfilled by care and social support

(i) physical health

Recipients of care and social support receive many physical and psychological health benefits. “Social support’s linkage with health outcomes, both physical health and psychological health, is widely recognized in the scientific literature” (Sarason et al., 1997, p. 551). A great deal of research has found that those in satisfying relationships are healthier (e.g., Heller & Rook, 1997; LaFollette, 1996), and recover from illness faster. Sarason et al. (1997) completed an extensive literature review on the relationship between health and satisfying relationships. They found that the most researched topic investigated the link between heart disease and social support. Supportive relationships enhanced an individual’s recovery from heart disease or surgery by moderating the harmful consequences of negative emotions. Social support also decreased the severity of symptoms of chronic diseases (e.g., asthma, arthritis, and chronic pain), and contributed to a better quality of life for those who were sick with these ailments. Additionally, social support has been associated with faster recovery and increased survival of patients with cancer. In general, *satisfaction* with support was key when predicting health outcomes.

(ii) psychological health

Many studies also identify a link between social support and psychological well-being (Berg & Piner, 1990; Heller & Rook, 1997; Cutrona et al., 1990). Specifically, researchers have found that satisfying relationships improve our quality of life and increase positive affect (make us happy), which helps prevent depression. In a literature review of many studies on depression, Sarason et al. (1997) found that social support acts as a buffer against depression, even when people are under severe stress. Thus, the findings suggest that the relationship between social support and health is strong.

Although researchers do not know exactly how or why social support benefits our physical and psychological health, the *buffering hypothesis* has been developed to explain this link. Researchers have hypothesized that supportive relationships act as a buffer to help protect people from the negative effects of stress (Berg & Piner, 1990; Cutrona et al., 1990; Sarason et al., 1997). Close friends and family help people cope with stress, which decreases harmful physiological responses; improves immune system functioning (Cutrona et al., 1990; Heller & Rook, 1997); and alleviates depression, anxiety, anger and negative affect (Sarason et al., 1997). “Support is a major benefit of relationships. Being able to share stress, emotional challenges, and problems with someone else decreases their impact” (Hanna, 2000, p. 247).

(b) detrimental consequences of providing care

While recipients of care often receive many benefits, research suggests that caregivers may suffer detrimental consequences. The tasks of caregiving are often very diverse and can include providing direct assistance (instrumental help), running errands, providing health care, and dealing with social service professionals and other family members. Managing and coping with the multiple demands of one’s own life as well as a dependent family member is often very draining (La Gaipa, 1990). Caregivers may experience psychological, physical (i.e., health) and financial costs associated with caregiving. The psychological costs include “. . .depression, anxiety, frustration, helplessness, sleeplessness, lower morale, emotional exhaustion, restrictions on time and freedom, isolation, conflict from competing demands and interference in life style" (La Gaipa, 1990, p. 133). Additionally, caregivers may suffer from anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem, and periodic feelings of anger (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Caregivers who feel overly responsible for alleviating the suffering or distress of the dependent adult are also more likely to feel burdened, depressed, frustrated and physically ill. This may cause them to become more demanding and critical of the dependent adult (Heller & Rook, 1997; La Gaipa, 1990). Caregivers may also find it difficult to make new friends and perform tasks at work (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Caregiving may also be an economic burden because most caregivers find it difficult, if not impossible, to earn a full-time wage while caring for others (Eichler, 1997). All of these symptoms can be aggravated when the family is coping with a particularly long-term illness.

Dependent adults might also suffer detrimental consequences of family care. Usually, adults do not voluntarily become dependent. Depending on family members for support often causes tension and conflict between the need for autonomy (or independence) and dependence (La Gaipa, 1990). While autonomy is not necessarily positive and dependency is not necessarily negative, finding an appropriate balance is difficult. For the recipient of care, "the short-term effects include feeling smothered and controlled, feeling obligated to conform, and a sense of inadequacy, whereas the long-term effects include low self-esteem and identity problems, resentment, and depression" (La Gaipa, 1990, p. 122). The dependent adult may feel: diminished by requiring help, guilty for imposing on the caregiver, and angry with the supporter (Sarason, 1997). Moreover, adults who depend on a family member for assistance with daily hygiene, find it difficult to cope with the subsequent loss of privacy (La Gaipa, 1990).

Recipients of care might also suffer detrimental consequences if the family member provides inappropriate, ineffective or unresponsive care. This may happen as a result of “good intentions gone awry” (Heller & Rook, 1997, p. 665), or because it is often difficult to accurately assess the needs of a dependent adult (La Gaipa, 1990). Additionally, family members are not always the most helpful when coping with stress because of the phenomenon called “contagion of stress.” This refers to the fact that if one family member is stressed by an event, it is likely that other family members will be similarly stressed. For example, a woman whose husband is diagnosed with cancer will likely experience just as much stress, if not more, than her husband. This “contagion of stress” can interfere with the competent provision of support and care. Moreover, research has found that when individuals lack experience dealing with stress they often make ineffective or inappropriate responses that may aggravate the situation (Heller & Rook, 1997). In other words, confusion, uncertainty, and anxiety regarding the needs of the family member can interfere with the provision of appropriate care. Family members who are dissatisfied with their care are more likely to suffer from depression.

This section provided evidence that close, satisfying relationships are beneficial to our well-being by meeting many of our basic needs (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983; Eichler, 1997; Hazan & Shaver, 1994). A healthy or satisfying relationship was described with references to characteristics of relationships. From this we learned that “healthy” relationships are ones that are reasonably equal, mutually committed, respectful, and safe. Additionally, healthy, satisfying relationships are ones that meet our basic needs (Whisman, 1997; Young & Gluhoski, 1997; Zimmerman, 1992). Through the provision of social support, relationships help meet our economic, physical, social, psychological and interpersonal needs. They also help us to feel important, worthy, socially integrated, safe and secure. Consequently, close relationships make us happier, physically and mentally healthier, and better able to recover from illness and stress.

V. LESSONS FROM HISTORY AND CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

In previous sections, the focus was on how relationships influenced the well-being of individuals. This section focuses on the connection between society and relationships. The authors canvassed in this literature review make some fundamental recommendations relevant to social scientists and policy-makers.

A. Examine the Meaning of "Family"

One of the most important lessons of this literature review is to consider the meaning of "family." The review of recent statistical trends regarding relationships indicated that social trends have resulted in the evolution of diverse family structures to meet the needs of Canadians. Unfortunately, the meaning and definitions of the "family" have not evolved to reflect reality. The nuclear family structure is privileged, while diverse structures are marginalized (Cossman, 1997; Luxton, 1997). Structures that are missing from family discourse include: same-sex couples, those who "live with relatives" (e.g., adult siblings who cohabit, and adult children who have been divorced and return to live with a parent), friends who are family, and family-members who do not cohabit. There are several detrimental consequences of narrow definitions of the family.

1. Narrow definitions of “family” perpetuate discrimination

The meaning of “family” shapes our thoughts, perceptions and discussions of this social group. Family structures that are not included in definitions of the family are less visible, marginalized and seen as less “real.” This can lead to discrimination against diverse family structures. For example, anti-gay prejudice is prevalent and has many detrimental consequences to the well-being of many Canadians. Children who realize that society views their sexual orientation negatively, may incorporate these negative societal images into their own self-image. When this happens it results in what has been called *internalized homophobia*. That is, “negative feelings about one’s sexual orientation may be overgeneralized to encompass the entire self. Effects of this may range from a mild tendency toward self-doubt in the face of prejudice to overt self-hatred and self-destructive behaviour” (Gonsiorek, 1995, p. 32). When policies do not support diverse families it is harmful to children in additional ways (Stacey, 1998). Lesbian and gay youth are often portrayed as “. . .menacing to ‘the family’” (p. 137), when in reality homophobia makes “the family” a menacing place for them because they are often subjected to rejection, fear, and abuse (O’Brien & Goldberg, 2000). Thus, public support of gay and lesbian relationships would benefit the well-being of both adults and lesbian and gay youth.

The data also indicates that “family” policies directly and indirectly influence the well-being of many individuals, families and other relationships (Zimmerman, 1992). Thus, a second detrimental consequence of narrow definitions of “the family” is that it privileges certain family structures (e.g., married couples and the nuclear family), while the “invisible” families do not receive the same social benefits. Policies are also biased toward supporting individuals rather than interdependent relationships, and they are outdated because they do not address the needs of *all* families (Eichler, 1997; Zimmerman, 1992). Families are shaped by societal perceptions and by policies that affect them (Eichler, 1997). Policies that do not support diversity and ones that view same sex relationships as “deviant” or “immoral” are particularly harmful because they legitimize discrimination (Koggel, 1998, p. 148). According to Ghalam (1996),

> how family is defined can have many implications. For example, eligibility for employee benefits, child-care subsidies, child tax benefits and income support programs are often based on family structure or family income. Although much social analysis has focused on nuclear or census families, exploring other types of family arrangements could provide insight into a host of issues related to social change and socio-economic well-being. (p. 21)

Thus, there are several detrimental consequences of narrow definitions of family. This approach has led to discrimination, biases in research, and injustice in the development of social, legal and economic policies. One way to effectively challenge current social policies and institutional practices that perpetuate inequities is to understand the perspective of those who are oppressed and engage them in policy-change processes (Koggel, 1998). Therefore, a challenge for the future is to develop policies and programmes that best support diverse families.

2. Consider functional definitions of “the family”

The findings suggest that there is a need to expand our current understanding of “family” to include those families that are often “invisible.” But how can we define “family” if it is no longer adequate to define it by biological kin, marriage, conjugal relationships, or even by households? The researchers canvassed for this literature review recommend the importance of supporting the *functions* that families perform, rather than simply privileging certain family *structures*. Some of the functions performed by families include: caregiving; procreating; socializing and nurturing children; providing social and economic support; and the formation of loving relationships. Since diverse relationships can fulfill these functions, a focus on the function rather than the structure of relationships seems more productive.

B. Examine Policies and Programmes that Support Families

Researchers also recommended that policy-makers clarify the specific *objectives* of policies and programmes that support relationships (Zimmerman, 1992). This process would allow the public to evaluate whether policies are actually meeting the objectives. Explicit policy objectives include such goals as: enabling families to stay together, protecting individuals from poverty when relationships dissolve, and allowing women to make reproductive choices, for example.

Another researcher, Eichler (1997), recommends that a *social responsibility model* of the family would most benefit the well-being of individuals and society. In this model, legal marriage is present but not privileged over same-sex or opposite-sex couples who are not married, nor is it privileged over groupings of more than two people who function as a family. Since one function of families is caring for dependents, *all* dependency relationships would receive social recognition and support. This model also suggests that the division of labour and family roles would not be based on sex. Moreover, parents would continue to be responsible for their child/ren's economic well-being even if they do not live in the same household. If one or both parents are unable to economically contribute to the provision of child care, then the public would share the cost of care (Eichler, 1997). Thus, this approach emphasizes societal responsibility for supporting diverse relationships.

C. Support Relationships

> Families are the crucibles in which our personalities are formed, and, as such, are critical to us as individuals. They are equally important for society. If families, as the major caring units, fall apart, society will ultimately fall apart. On the other hand, this is only half the picture. The other half is that society provides the context within which families can prosper—or fail to prosper. (Eichler, 1997, p. 3)

As this quotation by Eichler suggests, relationships are important, both to the well-being of individuals and society. The development of trusting and caring relationships helps to strengthen our communities (Weinstock & Rothblum, 1996) and some have argued that the family is the "cornerstone" or foundation of a well-functioning society (Bailey, 1999; LaFollette, 1996).

"Providing care for inevitable dependants has a high *social* value, not just a private value" (Eichler, 1997, p. 143), thus it deserves support from public policy. Costs associated with caregiving have been assessed by calculating the costs and consequences of absenteeism from paid work; and the expenses associated with hospital care and housing. For example, "Statistics Canada data indicate a 100 percent increase in recent decades in absenteeism for personal or family reasons. Some 37 percent of that increase is attributed to time spent caring for an elderly relative" (Martin-Matthews, 2000, p. 345). Since caregiving is expensive in terms of financial, psychological and emotional costs to the caregiver, the state benefits in many ways from this unpaid work done by the family.

The assumption that families are “naturally” able to provide appropriate care should be questioned, because it is often used as an excuse to do nothing to support families (Bernardes, 1997).

> The fact that naturally occurring social relationships sometimes fail to provide needed support, or worse, provoke conflict and distress, provides a rationale for interventions designed to improve these relationships or to develop new relationships that can serve as sources of support. (Heller & Rook, 1997, p. 665)

Caregivers need support, and policies and research tend to focus on the recipient of care rather than the caregivers. This is problematic because the high rates of caregiver burnout are one indication of the high costs to caregivers (McDaniel, 1996). Caregivers require moral, economic and social support (Eichler, 1997).

“Among the new insights is that families do vital work for society, much of which remains hidden, unacknowledged, and gendered” (McDaniel, 1996, p. 201). Thus, another issue regarding caregiving is that women provide most of the care to families. They are more likely than men to use sick days to care for family members, and they are twice as likely to report lost opportunities for promotion because of providing care. Thus, Eichler (1997) suggests that we are in dire need of social policies to support this unpaid work done by families, particularly to support the people who do the majority of this work—women.

We learned that according to Attachment Theory, the first three years of a child’s life are critical for the development of attachment bonds. Moreover, patterns of attachment established early in life can have a profound impact on the well-being of adults. Providing care for young children is a challenge for most parents. Most Canadians find it is too financially difficult if only one parent works for pay. As a result, most fathers are employed, and approximately 70% of women with children under 16 years old are also employed (Nett, 1993). This means that many children need to be cared for by others for at least part of the day. Moreover, the number of children in Canada who require alternative childcare is increasing. For example, in 1971 there were 1.4 million children in need of alternative childcare, and by 1990, this figure increased to 3 million (Nett, 1993). This highlights the importance of supporting families in their endeavor to provide care for children.

An example of an issue that is often overlooked is the fact that children today are remaining dependent on their parents longer. Social and economic changes have contributed to high inflation, high unemployment, and a high cost of living. These changes combined with cuts in social spending mean that it is more difficult for adult children to make the transition to financial independence (Mitchell, 2000). Examples of policies that would address the needs of adult children and their parents include: reducing the poverty and unemployment rate of young adults, and providing government subsidies and bursaries to make post-secondary education more affordable (Mitchell, 2000).

Thus, it is important to understand the types of support needed by both caregivers and the recipients of care. This information is useful for the development of policies and programmes that emphasize caregiving relationships, such as providing appropriate day care for dependants and respite care for caregivers; and developing employment policies that support individuals who want to care for family members or close friends.

In conclusion, this review of the social science literature on relationships, and of the types of families formed by Canadians, highlights the diversity of family structures that fulfill the needs of individuals. Alternatives to the so-called traditional family have always been relatively common, but changes in family ideology have not paralleled changes in family structure. A conservative ideology has led to narrow definitions of the family, causing many limitations to our understanding of diverse relationships. Moreover, it has caused certain relationship structures to remain privileged while others are marginalized or stigmatized. This suggests a need to broaden our conception of “family” to include more diverse structures. Researchers have also recommended defining families by their functions or “what they do,” rather than by their structure. Additionally, more research is needed on the prevalence of diverse families and the challenges they face. This is necessary for the development of appropriate social policies and programmes that would allow these diverse relationships and, therefore, *all* Canadians to flourish.

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