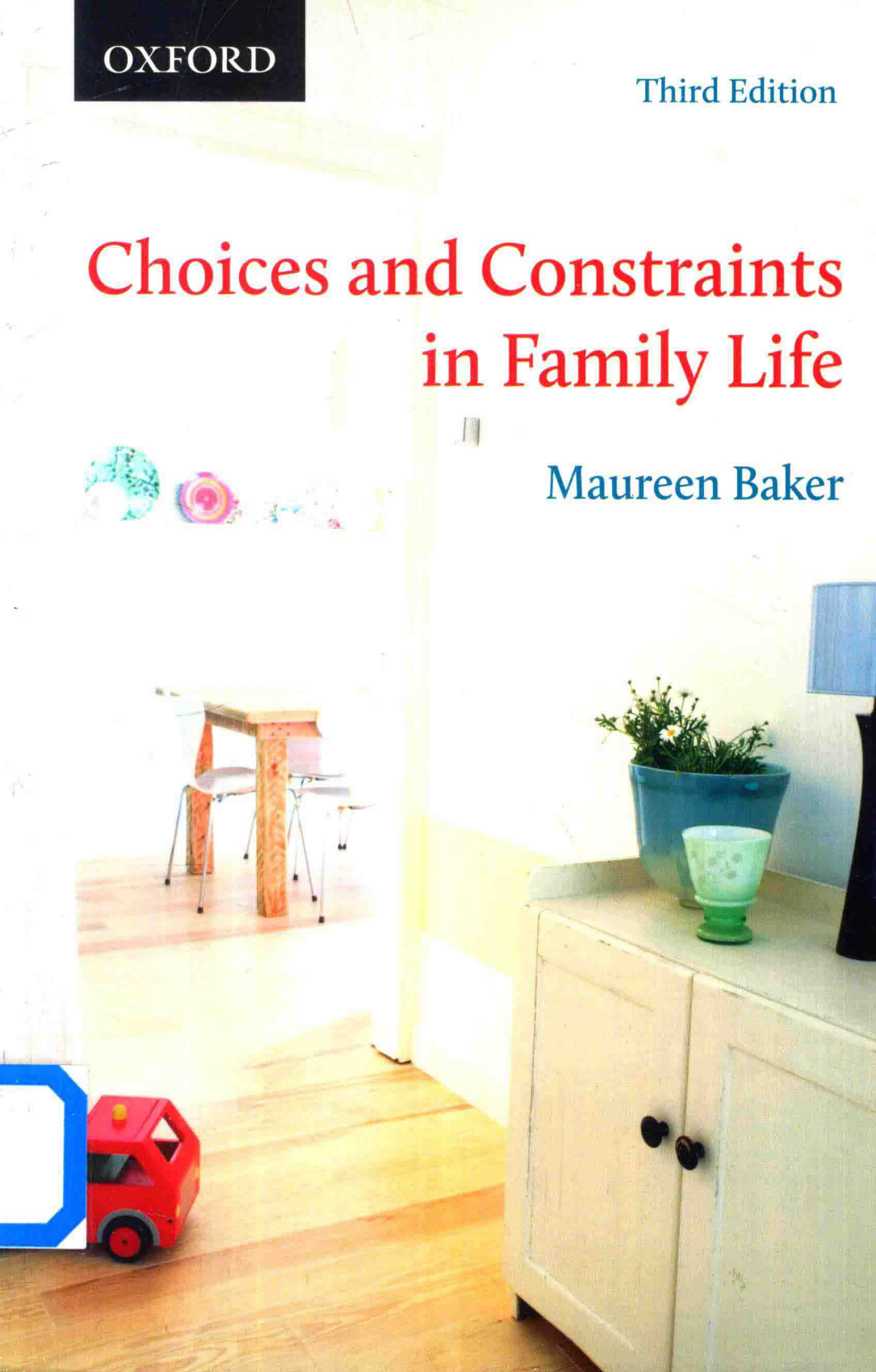


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Third Edition

# Choices and Constraints in Family Life

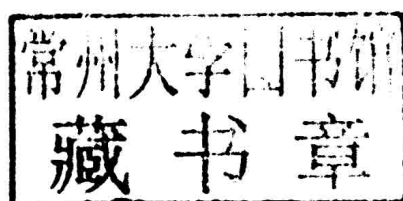
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Third Edition

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Maureen Baker



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# Preface and Acknowledgements

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Many young students seem to believe that they can create their own “personal biographies” or freely develop their own individual lifestyle and domestic relationships. Although I agree that more personal choices are available now compared to a few decades ago, I argue in this book that many of the old constraints on relationships continue and some new ones have been added. Current knowledge and controversies about intimacy, the nature of marriage, cohabitation, and family life are examined from the fields of sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, psychology, gender studies, and social history. These research findings are compared with some of the concerns of politicians and representations of personal and family life in the media.

Over the past few decades, the study of personal and family life has changed in terms of the basic assumptions behind the field, the issues being researched, and the practical relevance of the research. In my view, new life has been breathed into the sub-discipline by paying greater attention to gender relations and domestic work as well as issues relating to cohabitation, same-sex relationships, the creation of personal identity, new reproductive technologies, fathering, and public discourse about parenting and family responsibilities. I show that while innovative family patterns have developed in recent years, some of these “new” patterns are really variations on older themes. In addition, a number of battles fought in the 1960s and 1970s relating to gender equity and work/family balance continue unresolved into the twenty-first century.

A number of colleagues have assisted with the development and preparation of this book. Back in the early 1980s, Professor Lorne Tepperman from the Sociology Department at the University of Toronto encouraged me to edit my first book about families by recommending me to a publisher. Lorne also recommended me to author the first edition of *Choices and Constraints in Family Life* with Oxford University Press. I am very grateful for both suggestions. Second, I would like to thank the staff at Oxford University Press, especially Mark Thompson (developmental editor) and Richard Tallman (copy editor), who helped guide my revised manuscript into the third edition. Although I live in Auckland, New Zealand, and my publishers operate from Toronto, the process ran very smoothly using electronic mail with all three editions. Third, I would like to thank my partner, Dr David Tippin, for his continuing support throughout the preparation of this book and all my other academic projects.

Maureen Baker

University of Auckland, New Zealand

January 2013

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# Variations in Family Life

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## Learning Objectives

- ◎ To understand the different ways that families and family policies have been defined.
  - ◎ To explore some historical changes in marriage and family life.
  - ◎ To investigate the ways that family experiences vary by gender, ethnicity, and social class.
  - ◎ To understand some cultural variations in family and marriage systems.
- 

## Introduction

Compared to a few generations ago, some aspects of family life have changed considerably. For one thing, our intimate relationships now involve more personal choices about partners, sexual behaviour, and living arrangements. In the twenty-first century, more of us believe that we have the right to choose our partners without interference and that whether or not we cohabit, formalize our relationships, or produce children should be our own decisions rather than something we might be pressured to do by family members, religious leaders, or legal requirements. Many people also feel that they should not be forced to remain with their partner if that relationship proves unsatisfactory.

In this book, I argue that intimate relationships are certainly influenced by our personal preferences but to a large extent our “choices” are shaped by family circumstances, the attitudes and behaviour of our friends, and events in the wider society, such as downturns in the economy, labour market changes, technological innovations, media representations, and new ideas about human rights or personal entitlements. Consequently, patterns are noticeable in family life, including rising rates of cohabitation, the formalization of same-sex relationships in some jurisdictions, fewer births of which more occur outside marriage, higher rates of separation and re-partnering, and more step-families. In fact, similar trends in family and personal life are apparent in most Western industrialized countries (Lewis, 2003; OECD, 2011c).

At a time when more of us insist on making our own choices about partners and children, many people also expect government or public agencies to safeguard their human rights, to protect them from violent relationships, to help them manage problem children, or to supplement their inadequate

household incomes. New public expectations have heightened controversies about who is responsible for protecting and supporting vulnerable family members and those in need. Public debates have also questioned the validity of new forms of marriage, sought solutions to declining fertility and the enforcement of child support after separation, and examined new ways of interacting with immigrants whose family practices diverge from the majority.

“Child poverty” is growing in many countries despite political promises to reduce or abolish it, and this poverty is aggravated by higher rates of marriage breakdown as well as labour market deregulation (UNICEF, 2005). Especially in the **liberal states** (or Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States), policy-makers continue to search for ways to reduce this poverty. However, they are also concerned about maximizing personal responsibility for family well-being and reducing income taxes and social spending—and one set of goals seems to counteract the other. Nevertheless, controversies over relationships and family obligations permeate both public policy debates and private conversations.

This book aims to understand how relationships, family practices, and family policies have changed over the past decades in Western industrialized countries but especially in the liberal states. It also aims to differentiate between *actual* changes and the misconceptions voiced in political speeches or perpetuated in the media. Discussions of social research will reveal that our personal choices about intimate partners, having children, dissolving relationships, and maintaining contact with parents and siblings are influenced by our family and friends, our cultural upbringing, our socio-economic circumstances, the social policy environment, and political and economic events in the larger society. This means that the nature of family and personal life is always changing, although some aspects have remained remarkably stable.

The studies and examples used to illustrate the arguments in this book are derived from several different countries but focus particularly on Canada and the other liberal states (Esping-Andersen, 1990) because these countries usually expect individuals to rely on employment earnings and the assistance of household members and voluntary organizations for well-being. Relatively ungenerous state assistance is made available only when people cannot cope. However, by examining relationships and families in various countries, eras, income levels, and cultural circumstances, we are better able to understand the diverse factors that influence personal choices about love, sex, marriage, and family formation.

## Defining Families

The word “family” is used in various ways in popular usage, referring in different contexts to our parents, siblings, spouse, and children, as well as referring to all the relatives sharing a household and the larger group of relatives

with whom we may or may not maintain some contact. Social scientists usually feel the need to clarify the meaning by adding qualifiers such as **nuclear family** (husband, wife, and children sharing a household with no other adults present) or **extended family** (husband, wife, and children sharing a household with other relatives such as grandparents, aunts, or uncles). Most academic and policy definitions focus on the structure of family households—whether it is nuclear or extended, and whether it contains one or two parents. They also emphasize the legality of the relationships—whether partners are married, in a civil union or civil partnership, or cohabiting—rather than considering feelings of love or obligation, or shared activities.

Early social scientists called the family a **social institution**, emphasizing the rules and expectations that guided family patterns and interaction. They stated that the family consisted of at least two adults (one female, one male), united by marriage, living together, pooling their resources, sharing intimacy, and producing and raising children (Murdock, 1949; Goode, 1964). Over the years, this definition has been challenged as ideological, outmoded, and over-emphasizing the heterosexual nuclear family. Increasingly, academics and ordinary citizens argue that the structure of families or the legality of their relationships is less meaningful and has fewer implications for their daily lives than the services that household members provide for each other or how they feel about these relationships. Consequently, both researchers and advocacy groups suggest that definitions should be broadened to encompass caring and enduring intimate relationships regardless of their legal or blood ties (Cherlin 2010; Luxton, 2011; May, 2011).

Governments, however, are particularly concerned about who shares a dwelling, whether or not couples have formalized their relationship or share a “marriage-like relationship,” and the legal relationship between adults and any children living in the household. This information tells state officials who should be held accountable for financial support, care, and protection. They are particularly interested in whether households contain one or two adults, how much income is available to support the children, whether families require state income assistance, and whether vulnerable members are “at risk.” The state develops specific definitions of family for planning and policy purposes and is unwilling to allow people to create their own definitions, especially when making decisions about entitlement for social benefits or immigration status. However, advocacy groups persistently pressure the state to expand or clarify its definition of family. Many governments have recently responded by including same-sex couples and by acknowledging stepfamilies and the extended family arrangements of immigrants or indigenous peoples.

The fact that families are ancient institutions with many structural variations provides opportunities for social scientists to note patterns and trends over time and to identify factors promoting change, or at least associated with change. For example, social researchers try to understand how couple

relationships and reproductive choices vary with socio-economic transformations such as industrialization, urbanization, the expansion of the service sector of the economy, widespread migration, the global economy, the computer revolution, and a growing individualistic and consumer-oriented society. Researchers and theorists study how these societal trends influence attitudes and behaviour, as well as public discourse, or the way people talk about sexuality, marriage, reproduction, parental responsibility, and divorce.

Despite evidence of diversity, “the family” is still being discussed in some circles as though it were a single institution that means the same thing to everyone. However, considerable evidence shows that family life has always varied—parents remarried, children lived with step-parents, and family members in the past shared dissimilar views about the nature of their home life and personal relationships. Canadian sociologist Margrit Eichler (1988, 2005) argues that before the 1980s, both the academic and policy portrayal of North American families resembled the nuclear family (with male breadwinner and female caregiver) rather than any other family configuration. Assumptions about family life were conservative and often based on the views of one member, without acknowledging gender differences or variations in viewpoint between children and parents. Academics and policy-makers also normalized the experiences of young, white, middle-class families in which two heterosexual parents and their biological children shared a household without other relatives, and the parents maintained a gendered division of labour.

Opponents of same-sex marriage still promote this nuclear family model even though most people no longer live in these kinds of households in OECD countries (Cherlin, 2010; Coontz, 2005; Giddens, 1992). A growing percentage of the population lives alone, some people never marry or reproduce, many couples separate, parents re-partner, children live with step-siblings, and children grow up and leave their older parent(s) in childless households. Although social research now emphasizes the multi-dimensional nature of family life, this diversity is not always incorporated into public discourse or social policy debates.

In many government analyses, a “family with children” refers to a heterosexual couple or lone parent sharing a dwelling with never-married children. These children could be their biological offspring, the children of their partner, or adopted children. A lone-parent or sole-parent family usually refers to one parent who shares a dwelling with her (occasionally, his) never-married children, without another adult present in the household. Although governments sometimes call these units “lone-parent (or sole-parent) families,” in fact they are typically “lone-parent households,” because the father usually maintains some contact with his children even when he lives apart. Consequently, other researchers use the concept of “post-divorce family” to encompass both the non-resident father (who often lives alone or with a new partner) and the mother-led household containing their children. More

descriptive terms, such as same-sex families, blended families, or stepfamilies, can help to clarify vague definitions.

The most prevalent definition used in policy research is the **census family**. There are cross-national variations of this term but Statistics Canada, for example, has redefined this unit as:

a married couple and the children, if any, of either or both spouses; a couple living **common law** and the children, if any, of either or both partners; or, a lone parent of any marital status with at least one child living in the same dwelling and that child or those children. All members of a particular census family live in the same dwelling. A couple may be of opposite or same sex. Children may be children by birth, marriage or adoption regardless of their age or marital status as long as they live in the dwelling and do not have their own spouse or child living in the dwelling. Grandchildren living with their grandparent(s) but with no parents present also constitute a census family. (Statistics Canada, 2006)

This definition reflects the legal changes for same-sex couples but also socio-demographic trends in the country. However, the structure of census families has also changed over the decades, as Table 1.1 shows for Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, with fewer couples in 2006 living with children, more cohabiting, and more households led by lone parents than in 1986. Since the 2006 figures were published, the Canadian census from 2011 shows a further increase in the percentage of “common-law” couples and one-parent families (Statistics Canada, 2012a). In 2011, 16.3 per cent of children aged 14 and under in Canada lived with common-law parents, compared to 12.8 per cent in 2001. If we look at all households in Canada, the gap between those without children and those with children widened in 2011, with 29.5 per cent comprised of couples without children and 26.5 per cent comprised of couples with children. A further 27.6 per cent of households contain only one person (*ibid.*). In addition, of all the couple families with children in 2011, 87.4 per cent were “intact” families while 12.6 per cent were stepfamilies (Statistics Canada,

**Table 1.1 Percentage of Census Family Types, 1986 and 2006**

% of All Census Families	Canada		Australia		New Zealand	
	1986	2006	1986	2006	1986	2006
Couple families with children in household	52	41	56	45	53	42
Couple families without children in household	—	43	30	37	33	40
% of couples not legally married	7	16	6	15	12	18
One-parent households	13	16	8	16	14	18

Statistics Canada (2008a) “Census Snapshot of Canada—Families”, *Canadian Social Trends*, 39. Catalogue no. 11–008; AIFS (2008); Qu and Weston (2008); Research New Zealand (2007: 9); Ambert (2005); Statistics New Zealand (2004); NZ 1991 Census, Table 13, Family Types 1986–1991.



2012c). If policy-makers acknowledged these changing family patterns, the social programs they create or restructure might look quite different.

Some cultural or religious groups prefer to live in extended family households consisting of parents and/or siblings, as well as their spouses and children. These groups argue that the “census family” is only one family structure (essentially the nuclear family or a one-parent household) and that to assume this is the normal arrangement misrepresents sources of caring and social support in their lives. This definition also creates problems when they want to sponsor family members as immigrants, especially their unmarried adult daughters or married siblings. Using a nuclear family definition could also create a problem if a large group of extended family wanted to visit a sick household member in hospital but were denied access because they were not “close family.” Assuming that the normal family is nuclear also implies that the family relationships of same-sex couples are different and less valid, and it deprives them of certain social benefits such as the right to be considered “next of kin” in medical emergencies. Issues of entitlement are always contentious, but clear definitions of “family” are essential for establishing eligibility for social benefits or designing the government census or research projects.

In this book, I use the plural term “families” to reinforce the idea that variations have always been apparent and that families were never as uniform as some people have implied. Generally, my definition of families is similar to the Canadian census definition plus the extended family (with grandparents or aunts/uncles), yet I acknowledge that definitions need to be more specific for some purposes, especially those relating to the eligibility for social benefits. Therefore, I often use adjectives with “family” to clarify the specific meaning (such as “step-family”). However, we need to keep in mind that definitions of family and of marriage have changed considerably over the past century.

## Historical Changes in Marriage and Families

Before colonization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the indigenous peoples in what are now North America, Australia, and New Zealand used a variety of family systems and practices, but most lived in tribal villages in extended family groups, placing high value on ancestry, reproduction and tribal loyalty. Some of the tribes were nomadic or semi-nomadic, some were **matrilineal** (tracing family descent from the mother’s family), and some arranged marriages, but few gave priority to the nuclear family household or believed that the land could be owned solely by individuals. When their territories were colonized, the European settlers typically expected the indigenous tribes to adapt to European values and family practices, which gave centrality to the patriarchal nuclear family household, private property, and Christian values. These values were typically enshrined into family law and social policies in all the liberal states, with only a gesture made to the previous indigenous cultures.