

The Family and Family Structure Classification Redefined for the Current Times

Rahul Sharma

Department of Community Medicine, University College of Medical Sciences and Guru Teg Bahadur Hospital, Delhi, India

ABSTRACT

The family is a basic unit of study in many medical and social science disciplines. Definitions of family have varied from country to country, and also within country. Because of this and the changing realities of the current times, there is a felt need for redefining the family and the common family structure types, for the purpose of study of the family as a factor in health and other variables of interest. A redefinition of a “family” has been proposed and various nuances of the definition are also discussed in detail. A classification scheme for the various types of family has also been put forward. A few exceptional case scenarios have been envisaged and their classification as per the new scheme is discussed, in a bid to clarify the classification scheme further. The proposed scheme should prove to be of use across various countries and cultures, for broadly classifying the family structure. The unique scenarios of particular cultures can be taken into account by defining region or culture-specific subtypes of the overall types of family structure.

Keywords: Classification, definition, family, family structure, types of family

Introduction

The family as an integrated and functional unit of society has for a considerable period of time captured the attention and imagination of researchers.^[1] While the family itself is a matter of study, equally important for research is its role as a factor influencing and affecting the development, behavior, and well-being of the individual. The family is a basic unit of study in many social science disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, economics, anthropology, social psychiatry, and social work.^[2] It is also a unit of study in the medical sciences especially in understanding the epidemiology and the natural history of diseases. It also forms the basic unit for family medicine. Census definitions of family have varied from country to country and also from census to census within country. The word household has often been used as a replacement for family. Using the definition as “all people living in one household” may be erroneous, as on one hand it may include people who do not share kinship, and on other hand may exclude those kin members who are temporarily away.^[3] This type of definition fails to identify units that function as families in an economic, social or emotional sense but do not usually reside in the same

household.^[4] Although the literature often focuses on family living arrangements, family membership includes obligations across and between generations, no matter where family members are living.^[5]

The UNESCO report stated that a family is a kinship unit and that even when its members do not share a common household, the unit may exist as a social reality.^[3] This definition may be too broad to serve the purpose of identification of a family unit for the purpose of assessment as a factor in variables such as health. Just to give an example, a family in a developing country has a son living in the USA, happily married there with a wife, and he sends across some money to the other family members back home occasionally and visits the country once in many years. Should he still be counted as a member of the original family? Does this person (and his wife) share the same risks to their immediate health as the other family members back in the shared household? Would this individual and his dependants in the new surroundings have access to the same kind of health care options as the other family members living in the country of birth? And would the offspring of this person born in the foreign country experience the same sociocultural and environmental exposures, as (s)he would have come into contact with growing up in the country of origin?

Access this article online

Quick Response Code:



Website:
www.jfmpc.com

DOI:
10.4103/2249-4863.123774

Address for correspondence: Dr. Rahul Sharma,
Department of Community Medicine,
University College of Medical Sciences, Delhi-110 095, India.
E-mail: studycorner@gmail.com

Trask^[6] observed that while in the past, locale mattered, today social relationships are maintained over great distances with ease. Global communications such as the internet, e-mail, and satellite linkups are facilitating these relationships over space and time. Still, keeping in mind the previous pertinent questions that are raised if we want to consider the “family” as a factor influencing and interacting with other variable characteristics (such as health, environment, social behavior, etc.), the scales are still tilted toward defining the family as people ordinarily sharing a common living area. The meaning of the term “family” also depends on whether it is being interpreted in a social, biological, cultural, or statistical sense.^[4] It is important to identify a family unit and the members constituting the unit, for the purpose of studying their health, for example.

Need for Redefining

Desai (1994), as cited in Sonawat^[2] defined the family as a unit of two or more persons united by marriage, blood, adoption, or consensual union, in general consulting a single household, interacting and communicating with each other. While the definition is mostly fine, the interacting and communicating with each other may be a difficult thing to elicit or determine. An existing textbook of the medical specialty of community medicine makes it more objective by defining the interdependence part as “individuals living together and eating from a common kitchen.”^[7] It considers and defines three types of families: Nuclear, joint, and three generation families. However, practical experience in community has shown that these categories are not mutually exhaustive.

There are several new social dynamics and realities emerging with time. For example, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 of India recognizes and provides protection to female living in a relationship in the nature of a marriage with a male partner.^[8] Family research provides insight into the structure of society and the changes taking place in the types, composition, and growth of families.^[4] Families can be classified in several different dimensions, for example, by marriage type (monogamous, polygamous), by location (patrilocal, matrilocal, and avunculocal), authority (patriarchy, matriarchy), and by kin composition (nuclear, joint).^[3] In the present new classification, only the kin composition has been taken into account. Adjectives can be added to define the family as per marriage type or by locus of residence or authority.

In a social sense people may see themselves as being members of several families, as members of families with their parents and siblings and also members of families that they have formed themselves.^[4] However, in the current proposed classification for the purpose of family, the view is that an individual will in usual circumstance belong to one family only in a given role.

Because of the multitude of definitions of “family” and the changing realities of the current times, there is a felt need for redefining the family and the common types, for the purpose of

study of the family as a factor in health and other variables of interest. The following definition of a “family” is hence proposed:

“People related by marriage, birth, consanguinity or legal adoption, who share a common kitchen and financial resources on a regular basis.”

Nuances of the Definition

The family will comprise of people ordinarily living in the same house, unless work, study, imprisonment, confinement, foreign sojourn, or any other exigencies compel a member to temporarily live away from the shared house. Members who have been disowned legally will cease to be members of the family. Members living away from the physical premises of the shared house, who are not expected to return back to living in the house in the future, will also cease to be considered as members of this family, even though they may be sharing financial resources.

Common kitchen does not only mean just sharing of a physical infrastructure of a kitchen, but also sharing of common cooked meals in the kitchen. In such families where sets of members share the kitchen together but do not share financial resources, and those where sets of members share financial resources but do not share the kitchen together, the different sets of members should be counted as different families. Regarding common financial resources of the family, it is the *sharing* that is more important than *contributing*. An unmarried relative may be there who is not earning and thus not contributing economically to the family purse, but will be counted toward the family if (s)he is sharing the family financial resources.

The term “*on a regular basis*” in the definition, is left open-ended deliberately. In some families, people may have had tiffs and stopped sharing food together for a period of time that may be few days, few weeks, or few months. After what period of time do we say that they stop comprising a single family? Similar dilemma is there for a time period cutoff regarding nonsharing of financial resources. And a very important aspect in this decision would be future intent, that is, whether the constituents think the differences are irrevocable or they think the possibility of getting together is there, whatever may be the period of nonsharing thus far. In case of any doubt, it is best left to a subjective assessment of the individual family unit at hand. The researcher may directly ask the constituents whether they still consider themselves as belonging to a single common family or not. It has been noted earlier that family membership and obligations are subjective and can only be fully understood from the perspective of the family concerned.^[5]

A student who goes to reside in any other city for few years of education and stays in a hostel, with guardians, or in a private accommodation, does not cease to be a part of the original family for those years, only because (s)he is not sharing the family’s common kitchen. However, to be counted as a member of the original family, (s)he must continue to share in or receive money or other things of monetary value from the financial resource pool of the family. One important caveat would be that the

individual must have the intent of returning to the original family in the future, unless compelled by needs of higher studies or job.

Another case may be of a young adult member of the family who has gone abroad for work, or who went abroad for higher education and ends up finding a vocation there. Such a person may visit back on rare occasions to his or her family of origin, but is reasonably expecting to be staying put in the new location for the foreseeable future. Such a member would not then be exposed to the risk factors or the protective social factors common to the other members sharing a residence. So this person should be counted as belonging to a separate new family, irrespective of whether (s)he has married and irrespective of sharing of financial resources with the original family back home.

Biologically unrelated individuals living together in an institutional setting, for example, hostel, boarding school, working women's hostel, and so on, or living together in a single house, will be counted as belonging to their family of origin or as separate family units (single individual families) as the case may be depending on their future intent. They will not be combined or considered together to form new family units. A person imprisoned for a known period of time does not cease to be a member of the original family (unless legally disowned by the head of the family, or by the next head of the family if (s)he happens to be the head). This is because the person is expected to have the intent of returning to the original family unit as soon as the period of confinement is over.

Classification Scheme for Family Structure

A new classification scheme for the various types of family structure is being proposed, keeping in mind the redefined "family." The various types of family under the proposed classification scheme are detailed in the Table 1. The first step was to define the various types of family possible, which will cover the myriad variations possible in the current times. Then came the question of coming up with suitable terms to label the categories of family types, and it was thought of to come up with a uniform terminology scheme-based on the classic terms.

The word "nuclear" was picked upon, that represents a married couple as forming the "nucleus" of a family, as per existing classifications of family structure. Continuing with the word "nucleus," terms from the atomic world were explored to extend the analogies to the family structure types. For example, a proton would be an incomplete nucleus, a solitary existence. Electrons would be something outside the nucleus, that is, a married couple (nucleus) is not there. An atom would be having a single nucleus only and possibly multiple electrons. Two nuclei cannot be there in an atom, it would have to be a molecule. So the presence of two married couples makes a family "molecular." It may be clarified here that terms from physics were chosen here just for the nomenclature of the proposed family types. This was done as the word "nuclear" was already being used. Use of these terms borrowed from physics is expected to aid in easier appreciation and recall of the various family types.

Table 1: The proposed classification of types of family

Type	Name	Description	Examples
I	Proton	Single individual	24-year-old man living alone 50-year-old female living with three married sons and their families, but cooking her own separate food and living in her own separate room
II	Electron	No married couple	50-year-old widowed lady, 24-year-old unmarried son 25-year-old man, 22-year-old brother
III	Nuclear	Single married couple with/without their unmarried children	32-year-old man, 26-year-old wife 40-year-old man, 36-year-old wife, 14-year-old daughter, 11-year-old son
IV	Atom	Nuclear family with any other family member(s) but no other married couple	32-year-old man, 26-year-old wife, 56-year-old widowed mother 40-year-old man, 36-year-old wife, 14-year-old daughter, 11-year-old son, 32-year-old divorced brother, 36-year-old unmarried sister
V	Molecular	Exactly two married couples of any different generations (vertical levels) with/without unmarried people of any other generation	65-year-old man, 62-year-old wife, 40-year-old son, 36-year-old daughter-in-law, 14-year-old granddaughter 75-year-old man, 70-year-old wife, 27-year-old grandson, 24-year-old granddaughter-in-law 65-year-old man, 62-year-old wife, 40-year-old son, 36-year-old daughter-in-law, 14-year-old granddaughter, 35-year-old son (second), 32-year-old son (third)
VI	Joint	Two or more married couples of a single generation (horizontal level) or three or more couples if multiple generations (vertical levels)	40-year-old man, 36-year-old wife, 14-year-old daughter, 11-year-old son, 35-year-old brother, 28-year-old brother's wife 65-year-old man, 62-year-old wife, 40-year-old son, 36-year-old daughter-in-law, 14-year-old granddaughter, 35-year-old son (second), 28-year-old daughter-in-law 65-year-old man, 62-year-old wife, 40-year-old son, 36-year-old daughter-in-law, 14-year-old granddaughter, 58-year-old brother, 54-year-old brother's wife
VII	Quasi-	The prefix "quasi-" can be added to any of the previous types (III onward), for a couple who are sharing kitchen and financial resources as a married couple but not legally married	Quasinuclear: 30-year-old man, 26-year-old woman living in a relationship in the nature of a marriage

The classic term of “joint family” has been retained to define the complex sharing of resources by multiple couples. However, the traditional “joint family” has also been redefined and has two different meanings depending on the number of generations present. Generally across various cultures, obligations to siblings are usually weaker than to parents.^[5] This is the reason why the proposed definition of joint family considers different number of couples, depending on the number of generations involved. Two married brothers (or two sisters) living together with their respective families would qualify to be termed as a joint family.

It is a difficult task to categorize families according to any theoretical type or to generalize across or within cultures.^[5] An endeavor has been made to try to redefine the family as well as the

types of family to keep up with the changing times. However, as per practical experience, the community throws up scenarios which may test any theoretical model of classification. Keeping this in mind, an exercise was done to contemplate a few exceptional case scenarios and discuss their classification as per the new model, in a bid to clarify the classification scheme further [Table 2].

Changing Family Dynamics in the Current Times

A paper on the structure of families in New Zealand over time has observed that the family is constantly changing and diversifying there. Same-sex couples have been included in the

Table 2: Discussion of a few case scenarios and examples of classification as per the new scheme

Case	Situation	Will be classified as Type-Name	Remarks
A	Sister A, her husband, ± their unmarried children, Sister B, her husband, ± their unmarried children	VI-Joint	The family classification does not take into account the linearity, i.e., from male side or female side. The linearity may be a culture-specific phenomenon only.
B	Son living abroad, married. Widowed mother and unmarried sisters living together. Son supports the mother, sisters financially. Son has no intent of coming back to reside.	II-Electron (mother’s family here) III-Nuclear (son’s family)	As the son is not having any immediate intent of coming back, he should be regarded as a separate family. However, if the intent is that the mother will come abroad to reside with the son after the daughters’ marriages, the entire situation will be one atom family (type IV).
C	Husband, wife, two unmarried daughters, widowed brother, and brother’s unmarried son.	IV-Atom	As there is only one couple and many other unmarried relations.
D	60-year-old man, 56-year-old wife, 26-year-old son, 22-year-old daughter-in-law, 24-year-old daughter, 27-year-old son-in-law ± unmarried children	VI-Joint	As linearity is not being considered, the daughter and son-in-law living in the same house will be counted as a couple. Three couples across generations, makes it a joint family. Again, the future intent of this couple, i.e., permanent stay in this house or intend to move out later, will be important.
E	Husband, wife, unmarried son, very close unmarried friend who lives together, shares the meals and contributes to the family financial pool.	III-Nuclear plus I-Proton	The close friend will be counted as a separate family (proton family), as criteria for family not fulfilled.
F	Four unmarried males unrelated to each other, who are not in contact anymore with their original families, have no intent of returning back, live together in a house and share kitchen and common financial resources.	Four different I-Proton families	
G.	Man, wife, three unmarried daughters, one unmarried son, unmarried sister, widow of brother 1, widow of brother 2, late brother 1’s unmarried son, late brother 1’s unmarried daughter.	IV-Atom	Howsoever complex this situation may seem, since there is just one married couple, this will be an atom family.
H.	Man, wife, son, daughter-in-law, unmarried grandson, widowed daughter 1, daughter 1’s unmarried son, unmarried daughter 2.	V-Molecular	As there are two married couples, but across two different generations, this would not qualify to be a joint family.
I.	Man has a legally wedded wife and children in one city, and has another woman living in a relationship in the nature of a marriage and children out of wedlock in another city.	III-Nuclear and VII-Quasinuclear	
J.	Man, legally wedded wife 1, unmarried children, legally wedded wife 2, unmarried children. All the members live together and share kitchen and common financial resources.	VI-Joint	The man will be counted twice, once for each married couple. Since two couples at same level of generation, it becomes a joint family.
K.	Man, legally wedded wife 1, unmarried children, legally wedded wife 2, unmarried children. All the members live together but the two wives (and respective children) do not interact, nor share kitchen or common financial resources.	III-Nuclear and III-Nuclear	The man will be counted twice, once for each family.

data, but they can be identified as subsets of couple-only and two parent families. Certain types of family that are becoming more prevalent there include one-parent families and couple-only families.^[4] As per the new classification, these types of families can be identified as II-Electron and III-Nuclear family, respectively. The situation of a family with a married couple only and no children can be termed as a “nuclear couple family”, but it should be classified as a subtype of the nuclear family only and not as a separate type. Similarly, the sole-parent family can be identified as a subtype of an electron family (type II).

Unlike a previous definition given by Desai, as cited in Sonawat,^[2] “relationship by consensual union” has not been taken as one of the criteria for defining the family, in the basic definition proposed. As mentioned earlier, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 of India recognizes “domestic relationships in the nature of marriage,”^[8] but the legal and social positions are still evolving. However, in view of the social realities, a classification for families based upon such nuclear relationships has been put forward with the use of qualifier “quasi-” (type VII). Elliott and Gray^[5] have also discussed the gray zone caused by remarriage families (or “blended families” as they term it) in classification of families. There may be differences in both the emotional and financial support given to children between “natural” and “new” parents. Also, for many children, both their natural parents may play a very real part in their lives even if they do not live in the same household.^[4] These are emerging social realities in the Indian context too. But, counting an individual (e.g., the separated “natural” father/mother) in more than one family may lead to factual mismatches and also create lot of confusion. It is best to consider the remarriage family too as within the frame of the seven types of family set in the new classification, and to label them as a subtype “remarriage family” if required.

Importance of the Changing Family Dynamics for Health

Health has been shown to have multifactorial causation. The family surroundings affect the health of an individual in several ways. Members of a family can be expected to share the risk factors for their health that may arise from various social characteristics of their shared housing, neighborhood, community, society, and culture. They would also share the positive factors contributing toward good health. All the members of a family living together who share the financial resources of the family unit would also share the risks of ill-health and costs of health care as well as the protection offered by availability of money with the family to tide over health-related issues.

Living in a family would also mean usually exposure to similar dietary behaviors and health-related lifestyles, among the family members. Another important aspect shared would be the healthcare-seeking pattern and preference. The changing dynamics of family composition can have important impact on the protective as well as risk factors influencing health. Thus, an

updated definition and classification scheme for types of families serves an important purpose for the practitioners of various medical and social science disciplines in the current times.

Concluding Remarks

It is to be expected that the changing societal arrangements in the current times will be a huge challenge for any model of classification of family structure. On top of that is the challenge to keep the possible classification groups to the minimum possible, so that analysis of the family structure as a factor in health and other outcomes, in future studies, does not become an inordinately complex exercise. This is a proposed redefinition of “family” and a proposed scheme of classification of family structure, to try to match the pace of change of current societies. While the objective was mainly to redefine keeping the Indian cultural environment in mind, the sheer heterogeneity of the Indian population in terms of sociocultural milieu is immense. The current proposed scheme should generally suffice for use in other countries and cultures, for broadly classifying the family structure. The intricacies and unique scenarios of particular cultures can be taken into account by defining region or culture-specific subtypes of the overall types of family structure defined in the present article.

References

1. Sooryamoorthy R. The Indian family: Needs for a revisit. *J Comp Fam Stud* 2012;43:1-11.
2. Sonawat R. Understanding families in India: A reflection of societal changes. *Psicologia: Teoria e Pesquisa* 2001;17:177-86.
3. UNESCO Principal Regional Office for Asia and Pacific. The changing family in Asia: Bangladesh, India, Japan, Philippines and Thailand. Bangkok, Thailand: UNESCO; 1992.
4. Hodgson RM, Birks KS. Statistics New Zealand’s definition of family, its implications for the accuracy of data and effectiveness of policy targeting. Student paper no. 4. Palmerston North, New Zealand; The Centre for Public Policy Evaluation, Massey University; 2002.
5. Elliott S, Gray A. Immigration Research Programme: Family Structures. A report for the New Zealand Immigration Service. New Zealand: New Zealand Immigration Service; 2000.
6. Trask BS. Globalization and families: Accelerated systemic social change. New York: Springer; 2010.
7. Park K. Park’s text book of Preventive and Social Medicine. 22nd ed. Jabalpur: Banarsidas Bhanot; 2013.
8. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, Gazette of India. No. 43 of 2005. Available at: www.wcd.nic.in/wdvact.pdf [Last accessed on 2013 Aug 19].

How to cite this article: Sharma R. The family and family structure classification redefined for the current times. *J Fam Med Primary Care* 2013;2:306-10.

Source of Support: Nil, **Conflict of Interest:** None declared