Preface

We had a number of goals in mind when we embarked on the project of writing this book. First, there has been a huge growth in output within the field of Irish family sociology in recent years, thanks to the availability of funding for the analysis of major new data sources such as the *Growing Up in Ireland: The National Longitudinal Study of Children.* We believed that there was an unfilled need to bring these findings together in a student-friendly book that placed them in the context of national and international sociological theory and research on families, and that drew together some emerging policy implications.

Second, there is a wealth of 'classical' research on Irish families dating back to the early decades of the twentieth century, the value of which has been under-estimated in explanations of contemporary family change. We saw an opportunity to highlight for both students and general readers the contributions these studies have made, alongside an appreciation of contemporary scholarship.

Third, and most importantly, the availability of substantial new qualitative datasets made it possible for us to engage with contemporary theoretical perspectives by 're-visioning' the changing rhythms and textures of Irish family life over an extended period of social change.

Jane Gray was a co-principal investigator, together with Professor Seán Ó Riain, on the project funded by the Irish Research Council to develop an infrastructural database of qualitative life history narratives from three cohorts of Irish people, born in different historical periods, whose lives have traversed many social, cultural and economic changes since the earliest decades of the state. These *Life Histories and Social Change* interviews have been deposited in the Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA), where they are available for re-use by researchers and educators.

Growing Up in Ireland: The National Longitudinal Study of Children is a government funded panel study that is tracking two cohorts of Irish children over time: a 'child cohort' that joined the study at nine years of age, and an 'infant cohort' that is being followed from birth. As part of the first wave of interviews

with the nine-year-olds and their parents, and also with the infants' parents, researchers from the *Growing Up in Ireland* study carried out qualitative interviews with a selected group of participants. In the case of the child cohort, 120 children and their families were interviewed. The transcripts from these interviews are also now available through IQDA to academic researchers and students.

Thanks to a second grant from the Irish Research Council, Ruth Geraghty and David Ralph joined Jane Gray in the *Family Rhythms* project at Maynooth University. *Family Rhythms* was designed to act as a demonstrator and knowledge-exchange project for the analysis of archived qualitative data, using the *Life Histories and Social Change* interviews and the interviews from the *Growing Up in Ireland* child cohort. This book is one of the principal outputs from that project. We believe it is unique in bringing a comprehensive overview of existing sociological knowledge about family change into dialogue with original analysis of qualitative data to develop a new understanding of the changing contours of Irish family life. The rich memories, reflections and descriptions that we have included throughout provide context and depth to the quantitative data and abstract ideas that also inform our analysis. More significantly, they have allowed us to develop new insights into the motives, feelings and rationalities behind Irish peoples' family practices and experiences in changing social contexts – aspects of the explanation of social change that are not so easily captured in quantitative data.

We would like to acknowledge the generosity of the Irish Research Council in funding the research towards this book and to extend our thanks to researchers from the *Growing Up in Ireland* team for their assistance with the data. We are grateful, also, to the Maynooth University Research Development Office for providing support through their Publications Fund. The National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis at Maynooth University provided a congenial home to the *Family Rhythms* project. Thanks to Professors Rob Kitchin and Mark Boyle who supported us in their capacity as Directors of the Institute and to Rhona Bradshaw and Orla Dunne for their assistance in managing the project.

The IQDA plays a key role in making qualitative data available for sharing and re-use. It has been funded by the Irish Government as part of the Irish Social Science Platform under the fourth Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTLI4), and as a participant in the inter-institutional consortium that has developed the Digital Repository of Ireland (DRI) with the assistance of government funding under PRTLI5. The *Life Histories and Social Change* dataset forms the basis for a demonstrator project on enhanced qualitative social science data (Irish Lifetimes) in the DRI.

This book forms part of the emerging knowledge available to researchers, students and the public, thanks to the up-scaling of new social science research data in Ireland. It demonstrates the value of 'big' qualitative data for enhancing our understanding of social change and for informing policy. Prospective

qualitative research will continue to play an important role in the future. We hope that future waves of the *Growing Up in Ireland* project will include qualitative modules as part of that endeavour.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the Irish people of many different ages and backgrounds who contributed the narratives that inspired this work. Jane Gray would like to thank Paul, Rebecca and Adam for their patience and love as she worked on this project and to acknowledge how Lewis Gray's wisdom helped her to understand the textures of Irish life across the generations. Ruth Geraghty would like to thank her family, especially Frank, Mary, Will, David, Marianne, Gordon, Deirdre, Alannah, Cara and Tom for their constant support, encouragement and love.

Introduction: Irish families in the sociological imagination

In an interview carried out in 2007, Rose (born in the 1950s) told researchers from Maynooth University how, when she was a teenager, her older unmarried sister had become pregnant:

> Now this … wasn't the done thing back in [the late 1960s] […] you were sent away […] but my mother and father took the child and legally adopted her and although she is technically my niece she's my sister, she was reared as a sister to the rest of us […] and then after that she was just a sister […] Then my mother went on to have another child. (Rose, b. 1950s, LHSC)

Including the adopted niece, Rose had nine siblings altogether. When she was in her early twenties, Rose married her first serious boyfriend with whom she had been going out for five years. Using the 'Billings' method of family planning they postponed having their first child for a couple of years while both worked and shared domestic tasks at home. However, when her first child came along Rose gave up her job to concentrate on raising her family.

Rose and her husband began to experience difficulties in their relationship and when her youngest was born they separated, although they have never legally divorced. Once her youngest child started secondary school Rose went back to education and later secured a part-time job. A number of years before her interview, Rose's daughter had an unexpected pregnancy:

> Oh it broke my heart, oh devastated I was, just you get over these things but, so she lives here with her little fella … Very hard time now, it took us all by shock. It took me a long time to come to terms with it. I think it was because she was so young. I mean, the others had had babies by then but she's not with the father now anymore, she has another boyfriend now, they're engaged, lovely lad. It just didn't work out with her and the father.

At the time of her interview, Rose's daughter was still living at home with her child, although she was engaged to marry and was looking for work, having completed her Leaving Certificate (final exam). Now that her grandchild was old enough to go to school, Rose planned to mind the child in the afternoons after she herself had finished work. Her other children were either married or living with their partners. To the best of their ability, Rose and her ex-husband had provided them with financial help to set up in their own homes.

Rose's story illustrates just some of the continuities, changes and diversity in Irish family lives that are explored throughout this book. As we go to press, Ireland prepares to introduce significant legislative changes to address the changing character of Irish family lives. According to Minister for Justice and Equality, Frances Fitzgerald, the new *Child and Family Relationships Bill* 'responds to a world where children are reared within married families, within lone parent households, in blended families, households headed by same-sex couples or by grandparents and other relatives', and where children are conceived through assisted human reproduction.[1] On 22 May 2015, the Irish people voted in a referendum to extend civil marriage rights to same-sex couples.

In some respects the changes prompting this new legislation have occurred in a very short space of time. In other respects, as Rose's story illustrates, there have been continuities in the challenges families faced across the generations. This book aims to document and explain the changing rhythms, textures and meanings of Irish family life from a sociological perspective through an innovative **qualitative longitudinal approach**, drawing on two major datasets newly available through the Irish Qualitative Data Archive (www.iqda.ie): *Life Histories and Social Change* and *Growing Up in Ireland*. **See Panel i.1 below for a detailed description of the datasets and how they are used throughout the book.** These datasets are described as qualitative because they are based on semi-structured interviews that encouraged people to talk about their lives in an open-ended way, rather than giving information through the 'box-ticking' method that we are familiar with from participating in surveys and questionnaires, such as the Census. They are **longitudinal** in the sense that they allow us to examine how people's lives changed as they grew up, formed families of their own, and aged in different historical periods from the 1930s through to the present. By including original qualitative data we aim to bring these changes to life and to provide readers with a front-row view of research on family change in Ireland. Before describing the plan of the book in more detail, we begin with a discussion of what is distinctive about sociological perspectives on family life.

1 Address by the Minister for Justice and Equality, Frances Fitzgerald TD at the Children's Rights Alliance Seminar on the Children and Family Relationships Bill 2015, Dublin Castle, 2 March 2015. http://childrensrights.ie/sites/default/files/conferenceproceedings/files/MinJusticeCFRBillSeminar020315.pdf. Accessed 16 March 2015.

Panel i.1 Description of the data

Throughout this book you will find quotations and narratives drawn from the following two datasets: *Life Histories and Social Change* (2007) – This database comprises 100 in-depth life history interviews with respondents from three birth cohorts, whose lives traversed the twentieth century. The database also includes life history calendars and retrospective social network schedules. These data provide a **retrospective** view on social change, because they are based on the individual life stories recounted to the interviewers; *Growing Up in Ireland* (2008) – This is a national mixed-method **panel study** centred on a child cohort (beginning at nine years) and an infant cohort (beginning at nine months). Panel studies provide **prospective** information on social change, by following a group of people through time. To date, the first qualitative waves of the nine-year-old 'child' cohort and the nine-month-old 'infant' cohort have been made available. This book focuses on qualitative data from the child cohort. These qualitative data include in-depth interviews with children and parents, and 'time capsules' incorporating a range of items including drawings, writings and images.

Together, these datasets allow us to track and compare the changing family experiences of people born before 1935, between 1945 and 1954, between 1965 and 1974, and those who were nine years old when interviewed, together with their parents, between 2007 and 2009 (see Figure i.1). Extracts from the two studies are presented throughout the book as evidence or examples of each topic under discussion. Data from the *Life Histories and Social Change* study are indicated by the abbreviation 'LHSC', while data from the *Growing Up in Ireland* study are indicated by 'GUI'. Throughout the book you will see direct quotations from

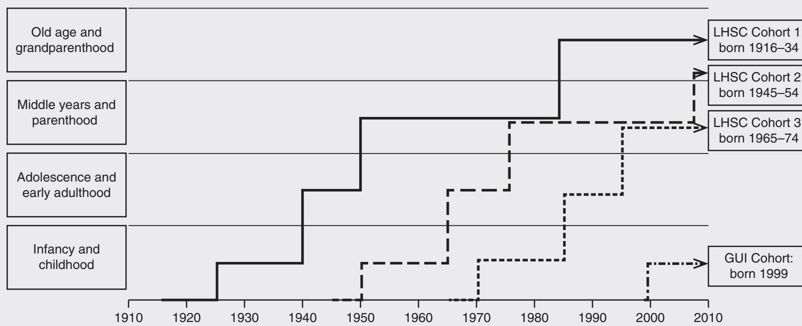

Figure i.1 Timeline showing four cohorts by life stage

Source: Life Histories and Social Change collection (2007); *Growing up in Ireland* collection (2008). (Timeline is based on average year of birth per cohort and is indicative only of life stage.)

participants in both studies; each participant has been given a pseudonym to protect their identity. Other potentially identifying information has been concealed or removed. In a small number of cases we have altered some personal details in order to protect participant confidentiality. **See the appendices for a list of all participants referred to in the book and for more technical descriptions of the datasets.**

When we quote an adult participant from the LHSC study we also provide their year of birth so that you can assess the **historical period** when they lived through a particular **life stage**. For example, 'Maurice (b.1966, LHSC)' indicates that the quotation is from 'Maurice', who was born in 1966, and participated in the LHSC study. When quoting a child participant from the GUI study we provide their age at the time of interview. For example, 'Frank (age 9, GUI)' indicates that the quotation is from 'Frank', who was a nine-year-old child participant in GUI.

In addition, each chapter includes panels on 'Looking at the data', in which we present a lengthier extract from either the LHSC study or the GUI study. These longer quotations are an opportunity to examine and assess **primary qualitative research data**, using the concepts and ideas that have been presented earlier in the chapter. Additional primary qualitative data, audio clips from interviews and sample questions can be accessed at www.iqda.ie/content/family-rhythms. **Refer to the appendices for technical information on the LHSC and GUI datasets.**

Families in the sociological imagination

Writing in 1959, the American sociologist C. Wright Mills used the example of marriage to illustrate what he meant by the 'sociological imagination':

> Inside a marriage a man and a woman may experience personal troubles, but when the divorce rate during the first four years of marriage is 250 out of every 1,000 attempts, this is an indication of a structural issue having to do with the institutions of marriage and the family and other institutions that bear upon them. (Mills, 2000 [1959]: 9)[2]

The promise of sociology, according to Mills, lies in its ability to trace the connections between the troubles we may experience in our daily life, and social processes that are, to some extent, outside our control. Notice that we don't say that personal problems are caused by processes outside our control. Because

2 Note that Mills was writing at the end of the 1950s. Divorce rates subsequently rose to much higher levels in the United States and other countries. **We discuss the Irish experience of divorce in Chapter 5.**

our private troubles may be linked to wider patterns of social change, it does not follow that we bear no responsibility for our actions, or that we cannot alter the social milieu within which those troubles arise. As shown throughout this book, the relationships between personal troubles and public issues are complex.

What makes the sociological approach different?

For many of us, the media provide much of our information about changing family trends, and thus the set of ideas with which we evaluate our individual family experience. Journalists often report and interpret general statistics about family life that have been gathered by organizations like the Central Statistics Office. They may interview 'experts' drawn from academic and research institutions, social care practice or voluntary organizations. They often include material drawn from interviews with 'ordinary people' to illustrate the family issue they are concerned with. Journalists strive to ensure that their facts and sources are accurate and reliable. They frequently refer to sociological or other scholarly research when constructing their interpretations and evaluations of the issue at hand.

So how do sociological accounts of family life differ from those of journalists? The principal differences lie in their reference to sociological theory, the systematic way in which their data are collected, and the extent to which the work is – at least initially – oriented to a professional peer audience (Ragin and Amoroso, 2010). One consequence is that sociological research often 'debunks' popular understanding of contemporary family trends. For example, year-on-year increases in the numbers of divorced people are often reported in the media in ways that imply that divorce is a growing problem in Ireland. But more systematic sociological analysis shows that the rate of divorce in Ireland is one of the lowest among western societies. Similarly, many people believe that the extended family has disappeared in Ireland, and that people no longer have the kind of support from grandparents and other relatives that they used to have in the past. However, sociological research suggests that contemporary families have as much support from grandparents as did earlier generations. **The relationships between children and their grandparents are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.**

Another way in which many people find information with which to evaluate their own family experience is through contact with social care workers, therapists and other clinicians. The members of these professions work at the coal face of changing family patterns. In the course of their work they accumulate a wealth of information about the problems people encounter in their family lives. What can sociological research, generated within the 'ivory tower' of universities and research institutes, add to their knowledge and experience? In fact, by collecting systematic data, linking findings to theory, and

making comparisons, sociology provides essential contextual information for understanding family problems.

Knowledge generated by practice-oriented research can be misleading if it is applied to society as a whole. In a classic example, widely reported research in the United States by psychologist Judith Wallerstein seemed to show that parents' divorce had very serious consequences for their children, well into adulthood (see Cherlin, 1999). Her findings were regularly cited in the debates leading up to the referendums on divorce that took place in Ireland in 1986 and 1995. However, Wallerstein's research was carried out with people who presented to her clinic – people who already felt they had problems – so it was unreliable as a source of information about the population of children whose parents had divorced. Sociological research in the United States showed that only a minority of the children of divorce experienced the kinds of problems she identified (Cherlin, 1999). In fact, Dr Wallerstein was so troubled by the use of her research by anti-divorce campaigners in Ireland that she was moved to write to them that 'I have always supported divorce as an important social remedy' (quoted by Carol Coulter in the *Irish Times*, 25 October 1995). **Sociological research on the consequences of divorce for children and children's experiences of living in a non-marital family is discussed in Chapter 3.** Knowing that a 'private trouble' is experienced by a minority of people does not trivialize the problem, or make it irrelevant, but it does contextualize it. In relation to divorce, for example, it prompts us to ask better questions about the particular circumstances under which it does cause severe problems for children, which in turn should allow us to make better interventions with those who seek help, and better social policy relating to the break-up of marriage.

The difference between knowledge generated by sociology, and knowledge created in clinical settings, illustrates both the strengths and limitations of sociology. It cannot guide practice at the level of individuals. The sociological imagination can empower us by alleviating the sense of being trapped by forces beyond our control. For example, if we know that a sizable minority of people experience violence in their family lives we may not feel so isolated and lonely, or inclined to blame ourselves. We may be motivated to make family violence a public issue, by campaigning for ways to alleviate the problem. **Domestic violence as a public issue is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5**. However, most of the time sociology will be of no direct assistance to us in solving our personal troubles: it will not tell us how to cope with a violent situation, or help a troubled child. Similarly, while sociology provides essential context for therapeutic practice, it does not provide a template for addressing the problems of individual clients. We can understand this better if we examine two logical errors that are often made with respect to the sociological imagination. Both involve confusing levels of analysis.

Avoiding mistakes when thinking sociologically

The **ecological fallacy** refers to the logical error of making inferences about individuals based on observations about groups. Suppose we find that areas of Dublin with high rates of unemployment are also areas with a high reported incidence of domestic violence, can we conclude that unemployed Dubliners are more likely to beat their spouses than employed Dubliners? When we think about this for a moment, it is clear that the answer is 'no'. There are both employed and unemployed people in the areas in question, and unless we have information about individuals, we don't know who is experiencing family violence. It could be that most of those who perpetrate violence at home are found amongst the employed people in the area, or it could be that employment status is irrelevant.

We often make this error in a more general way. For example, if we know that on average women who work full-time outside the home spend 7 to 10 more hours a week on housework than men who work full-time outside the home, can we assume that the man sitting next to us on the bus is a lazy slob who doesn't help his wife around the house? Again, the answer is 'no'. Sociological research on the division of household labour shows that there is a tendency for women to contribute a greater share; it does not claim that this phenomenon is universal.

It is also important to avoid the **individualistic fallacy**. Just because you may be a husband who shares equally in household tasks, doesn't mean that sociologists are wrong to say that most husbands don't contribute an equal share. Qualitative data, such as the quotations and stories presented throughout this book, can increase the risk of making this kind of error because they are not **statistically representative** in the way that quantitative data usually are. Consider Rose's story from the beginning of this chapter. Some aspects of her experience are 'typical' of the times she lived through, but others are not. For example, while families were certainly larger in the 1950s and 1960s than they are today, Rose's nine (or ten) siblings added up to a larger than average family for the time. While births outside marriage comprise a significant proportion of all births today (more than a third), births to teenage mothers like Rose's daughter are relatively uncommon.

Qualitative data are not intended to be representative of the population as quantitative data are. Instead, qualitative researchers seek to uncover the shared meanings and practices that give rise to the trends captured by quantitative researchers. Qualitative research can also be useful for revealing patterns that may be hidden to quantitative research. For example, we don't know how commonly births outside marriage were disguised in the past by formal or informal adoption, as in the case of Rose's niece. Both quantitative and qualitative research have an important part to play in grasping 'history and biography and the relations between the two within society' (Mills 1959: 6). What C. Wright Mills called the 'promise' of sociology lies in the space

between individual and collective experience, but it is essential not to confuse the two.

Changing sociological perspectives on families

From the early twentieth century at least through the 1980s, sociologists typically thought of 'the family' as an **institution**. According to one definition (Nolan and Lenski, 1999: 8), a social institution is 'a durable answer to a persistent problem' for human societies. Conventionally, anthropologists and sociologists have viewed the requirement of caring for infants – humans need adult care for much longer than is typically the case in other species – as the problem giving rise to the institution of the family. Social institutions like the family have been thought of as comprising a set of interdependent **roles** governed by socially agreed rules of behaviour (Cherlin, 2004).

Throughout much of the twentieth century sociologists were concerned with trying to understand how the family as an institution changed over time – especially in response to wider social changes such as industrialization and urbanization. Beginning in the 1970s, feminist and Marxist sociologists began to question whether the normative family described by sociologists met the requirements of all social groups equally, suggesting that working-class people and women were disadvantaged by the roles and rules that were enforced by social convention, and in many cases also by state policy. **Learn more about sociological perspectives on the family as an institution in Chapter 1.**

Writing in 1963, sociologist William Goode noted that sociologists approached the family both as an **ideal type** – that is, an abstract statement of what were thought to be the essential features of the family as an institution – and as a set of ideals that people aspired to. Sociologists have always recognized that – for a whole range of reasons – some people may not be able to live up to the prevailing societal ideal in their family life. Beginning in the 1980s, however, it became increasingly difficult for sociologists to identify either the ideal type or the shared set of ideals that governed families in western societies. Families, and the values people held about family life, were becoming more diverse. More babies were being born outside marriage; in many countries divorce rates were increasing rapidly; and men's and women's roles were being transformed. In the latter decades of the twentieth century sociological scholarship in the West was taken up with trying to make sense of this **convergence to diversity** (Boh, 1989) in family life within and between advanced industrial countries. **We will examine these debates in detail in Chapter 2.**

More recently, however, sociologists have responded to the changes in family life by going back to basics, that is, by investigating what families look like 'on the ground' (Morgan, 2011). Instead of beginning with a set of theoretical expectations about what 'the family' ought to be like, sociologists are turning to the qualitative research tradition to examine how people 'do family'

in their everyday lives. They have become interested in exploring the different configurations of relationships that make up people's family networks in practice, rather than beginning with the 'rules' of kinship and household formation (Widmer and Jallinoja, 2008). And rather than relying exclusively on survey data about family values to understand the ideals that govern family behaviour, they have begun to examine how people construct shared expectations by 'displaying family' (Finch, 2007) in different social contexts. This book is informed by these new approaches as it seeks to develop a new understanding of the transformation of Irish families since the early decades of the twentieth century.

As well as turning to qualitative approaches to understanding people's family lives, sociologists have, in recent years, renewed their interest in linking individual life paths to wider patterns of social and historical change (Elder, 1994; Hareven, 1994). The **life-course perspective** provides a number of useful concepts to help us understand the connections between personal and public issues so eloquently described by Mills. First, this perspective emphasizes the significance of **birth cohorts**. Many of us are familiar with the ways in which membership in particular social groups – such as social classes, or ethnic and racial groups – affect our **life-chances**. For example, people from poorer socio-economic backgrounds may be less likely to get a college education, which in turn may have consequences for how much they are likely to earn in their lifetimes. It is also true that people have shared experiences by virtue of being born around the same time, and by moving through life – and history – together.

We have become increasingly familiar with this idea in contemporary Ireland, as it has become clear that the consequences of the 'Celtic Tiger' and the 'Great Recession' varied, depending on what life stage you were at during these historical periods, and when you made key **life transitions**, such as setting up house, or starting a family. In trying to understand family change, sociologists have increasingly emphasized the importance of adopting a life-course perspective, because 'snapshot' representations of family patterns at particular historical moments can be misleading. For example, a comparatively low proportion of people marrying might mean that the practice of marriage is dying out, but it might just be that a particular cohort of people are postponing marriage to a later age. This book adopts a life course perspective on family change in Ireland, focusing on changing family patterns from the perspective of different life stages. **For more on the relationship between life course patterns and trends in demographic behaviour, see Chapter 2.**

Plan of the book

In the first part of this book, we provide an overview of the key theoretical perspectives and empirical debates that have informed the sociology of the family. Chapter 1 introduces the idea of the 'modern family' that dominated sociological scholarship during most of the twentieth century (and which had its

origins in nineteenth-century perspectives). In this chapter we also introduce the idea of **demographic transition**. Chapter 2 examines how sociologists have grappled with the rapid demographic and social changes that have affected western family lives since the 1960s, and introduces the conceptual framework for Part II of our book.

Part II aims to re-vision family change in Ireland from a qualitative longitudinal perspective. This part of the book explores the changing family experience from the perspectives of different life stages, drawing on the qualitative life narratives and semi-structured interviews in the two datasets described in Panel i.1 above. We examine the following life stages: childhood (Chapter 3), early adulthood (Chapter 4), parenting in the middle years (Chapter 5) and grandparenthood (Chapter 6). While we focus on continuity and change in the practices and experiences that make up everyday family life, we do not neglect the wider socio-historical context within which these continuities and changes occur. Throughout, we show how the **micro-practices** that made up people's individual family lives were played out in the context of **macro-societal changes** in **demography**, economy and values. We also emphasize the changing role of the state in responding to family patterns and in facilitating or constraining peoples' choices and practices. Throughout, we emphasize the Irish experience of family, highlighting exemplary Irish studies.

What makes Ireland interesting?

Ireland is an interesting case study for understanding changing patterns of family life for two reasons. First, as we have already noted, Irish family trends have changed very rapidly in recent years. Some of the most significant changes include:

1. Women are giving birth to fewer children
2. A considerably greater proportion of women are having babies outside marriage
3. More unmarried people live together in intimate partnerships
4. Divorce has been legalized and has become more acceptable
5. More mothers are participating in the paid labour force
6. Civil partnership, including for same-sex couples, has been recognized in law

Compared to other European countries, in Ireland many of these changes have been compressed into a shorter time span. Ireland is interesting precisely because its family trends have often seemed out of step with those of its European neighbours. As we will describe in Chapter 1, there is a growing body of research showing that the demography of Ireland is not as distinct as scholars once thought. Nevertheless, by comparing Ireland with other countries, we can learn a lot, not just about our own family patterns, but also about the

Panel i.2 Discussion: what do we mean by 'the family'?

Many sociologists argue that families are increasingly diverse, especially compared to the recent past. As we go through our lives, more of us move in and out of a greater range of family relationships than our parents did. For example, a child might begin life living with a single parent, then spend some time living with his or her mother and a step-father, then with a divorced parent and step-siblings. **As we will see in Chapter 3, however, most children across Europe spend most of their childhoods living with both parents**. No doubt you can think of other possible sequences at different life stages. Other factors leading to increasing family diversity include the use of new reproductive technologies, growing recognition of gay and lesbian families, and transnational family relationships. These changes challenge us to think about what we mean by 'the family'.

Bunreacht na hÉireann (Constitution of Ireland, 1937) describes the family as an institution founded on marriage. Over the years, government legislation, and amendments to the Constitution, have recognized changes in the form of marriage in Irish society. **See Chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion on the 'deinstitutionalization' of marriage.** For example, legal discrimination against children born outside marriage was abolished by the Status of Children Act in 1987. Provision for divorce was introduced in 1997. Most recently, civil partnership for same-sex couples, and 'marriage-like' protections for cohabiting couples, were introduced in 2011. The Irish state has extended the right to marriage to same-sex couples, following a referendum held in May 2015.

Do you think marriage is central to the definition of the family? Ask yourself whether or not the following might be considered 'family' in different circumstances:

1. A married couple without children
2. A gay couple with children
3. Two bachelor brothers living together on a farm
4. All the relatives a bride invites to her wedding
5. An intimate friend that you see every day and who has always been there in times of trouble and sickness

In everyday life we think of 'family' both in terms of the kinds of relationships that are involved – whether or not people are married, or are connected by 'blood' – and in terms of the quality of the relationships involved – we expect relationships between family members to be characterized by affection and a regular pattern of give and take.

To make matters more complicated, we tend to include different people in our understanding of 'family' depending on the context. The

'extended' family we invite to our wedding or expect to show up at our funeral is generally larger than the 'immediate' family with whom we share our daily lives, but we do not expect our relations with extended family members to have the same quality as those with our immediate family. Indeed, as sociologists are beginning to recognize, in everyday life our relationships with friends and neighbours can sometimes be more 'family like' than those with more distant 'blood' relatives. **Chapters 1 and 2 provide an introduction to some key concepts and ideas with which to describe and explain our changing understanding of 'family'.**

likely causes of family trends throughout the western world. By making comparisons, sociologists try to identify the common factors behind shared trends, and also the factors giving rise to differences amongst countries. Throughout this book, Irish family processes will be compared with those of other countries, primarily in Europe and North America. The increased availability of qualitative longitudinal research in other countries – such as scholarship from the *Timescapes* project in the United Kingdom (Neale et al., 2012) – also makes Ireland an interesting comparative case for understanding changing meanings, practices and displays.

Finally, Ireland is interesting because there is a wealth of fascinating ethnographic, historical and survey research on family life, dating back to the early part of the twentieth century. We believe that the value of this scholarship has been underestimated both within Ireland and in comparative research on family change. Throughout this book we provide detailed accounts of landmark studies in Irish family research.

In the next chapter, we begin our journey by showing how, by the middle of the twentieth century, sociologists concluded that a particular family type, which they called the nuclear, or **conjugal family**, functioned best within modern industrial societies. While many sociologists would no longer agree with this theory, it has exerted a powerful influence within the field of family studies and continues to inform everyday assumptions about the nature of family change.

Key concepts and ideas in the Introduction

- Private troubles and public issues
- Ecological fallacy
- Convergence to diversity
- Ideal type
- How people 'do family' in their everyday lives
- How people 'display family' in different social contexts
- Qualitative longitudinal data
- Life-course perspective on family change