Definitions are always important in all areas of social enquiry and not just in terms of the more immediate concerns and projects of the scholars themselves. In the case of family, these issues come to be of particular importance, partly because the terms used overlap with several everyday usages and partly because, in certain parts of the world, these words – family, marriage, parents etc. – have come to take on an ideological or political significance. A critical examination of family and family practices must be aware of some common themes and concerns across different cultures (if only to make some kind of cross-cultural comparison possible) while remaining sensitive to the culturally embedded character of these key concerns. Put another way there must be an awareness of the different ways in which family terms are deployed not only between cultures but also within a single society. Thus demographers, constructors of family policy and informal carers (to indicate just three sets of interested social actors) have different concerns and different practices. A critical sociology of family must be ever alive to these different usages.

We may examine these usages in a variety of ways. One common usage is as a noun where one talks about ‘the’ family. The dangers of this approach have been well-rehearsed …; it gives the family a fixed, reified, quality which runs the danger of losing sight of the wider context and of obscuring more fluid or more everyday understandings. Nevertheless, it might be argued that this usage does have some value in comparative research … and to talk about ‘the family’ can itself be of some critical use when it opens up a gap between ‘my’ family, the immediate and taken-for-granted family world which I inhabit, and some sense of ‘the family in general’.

However, it could be argued that there has been a shift within the sociological literature to using the word as an adjective, as something that gives a particular quality or character to some other, overlapping, sets of practices. Thus, in this present collection, we have references to ‘family policy’ … or ‘politics’ …, ‘family caregiving’ …, ‘family time’ … and ‘family power’ … My own discussion of ‘family practices’ attempts to explore what is entailed when scholars attempt to use the word ‘family’ in this way (Morgan, 1996). This character is partly provided by the range of practices signified by the use of the term ‘family’ (roughly, those practices to do with marriage or partnering and with parenting and generations) but also by the particular emotional significance that seems to accompany this usage of the word ‘family’. Thus, ‘family time’ is not just part of the broader patterns of time use within social settings but is frequently invested with further emotional or, indeed, moral significance.

Another usage, which is entering into the literature (at least by implication) is to treat the word as a verb or in terms of some verb-like usages. In the English language ‘to family’ still seems awkward, as does the associated idea of ‘doing family’. Nevertheless, the usage has considerable potential in reminding the reader of a more active and variable understanding of the word ‘family’. Thus step-parents may have to ‘do family’ more explicitly and more vigorously than some other parents partly because of some assumed suspicion that stepparents are not ‘proper’ families … To talk in a more active sense of ‘doing family’ is to point to the interchanges between families and significant others, whether these be other families or households, professionals of various kinds or representatives of state agencies. …

[This means] we are talking about the active presentation of family in everyday life.