

2

Families and Households

Key issues:

- What is the family and a household?
- Different forms of the family and marriage
- Is the nuclear family a universal institution?
- Sociological perspectives on the family
- Changes in the family in Britain
- Family diversity and the myth of the 'cereal packet' family
- The 'darker side' of family life
- Family ideology
- Politics, social policy and the family
- Is the family a declining social institution?

What is the family?

A **family** is a group of people who are related by **kinship** ties: relations of blood, marriage or adoption.

The family unit is one of the most important social institutions, which is found in some form in nearly all known societies. It is a basic unit of social organization, and plays a key role in socializing children into the culture of their society.

What is a household?

A **household** simply means one person living alone or a group of people who live at the same address and share living arrangements.

Most families will live in a household, but not all households are families. For example, students sharing a house together make up a household, though they are not a family. Similarly, in pre-industrial Britain, average household sizes were often larger than they are today, but this was generally because they contained domestic servants or other non-family members. Increasingly today, more households are containing people living alone rather than families. In 2000, nearly one in three households consisted of people living alone.

Different forms of the family and marriage

Even though the family is found in nearly every society, it can take many different forms. Marriage and family life in earlier times in Britain, and today in many other societies, can be organized in quite different ways from family life in modern Britain. Sociologists use a number of different terms to describe the wide varieties of marriage and household type. Table 2.1 summarizes these varieties.

Table 2.1 Forms of marriage and household

Forms of:	Description
<i>Marriage:</i>	
Monogamy	One husband and one wife Found in Europe, the USA, and most Christian cultures
Serial monogamy	A series of monogamous marriages Found in Europe and the USA, where there are high rates of divorce and remarriage
Arranged marriage	Marriages arranged by parents to match their children with partners of a similar background and status Found in the Indian subcontinent and Muslim, Sikh and Hindu minority ethnic groups in Britain
Polygamy	Marriage to more than one partner at the same time Includes polygyny and polyandry
Polygyny	One husband and two or more wives Found in Islamic countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia
Polyandry	One wife and two or more husbands Found in Tibet, among the Todas of southern India, and among the Marquesan Islanders

Table 2.1 (cont'd)

Forms of:	Description
<i>Family and household structure:</i>	
Nuclear family	Two generations: parents and children living in the same household
Extended family	All kin including and beyond the nuclear family
Classic extended family	An extended family sharing the same household or living close by
Modified extended family	An extended family living far apart, but keeping in touch by phone, letters, e-mail and frequent visits
Patriarchal family	Authority held by males
Matriarchal family	Authority held by females
Symmetrical family	Authority and household tasks shared between male and female partners
Reconstituted family or step-family	One or both partners previously married, with children of previous marriages
Lone-parent family	Lone parent with dependent children, most commonly after divorce or separation (though may also arise from death of a partner or unwillingness to marry or cohabit)
Gay and lesbian family	Same-sex couple living together with children
Single-person household	An individual living alone

Activity

Refer to table 2.1 and:

- 1 Interview a few people and try to find out what types of family they live in today. Is there any 'typical' family or is there a variety of family types? Write a report or do a presentation on your findings.
- 2 Fill in the blanks in the following passage. Each dash represents one word.

The _____ means just the parents and children, living together in one household. This is sometimes called the two-generation family, because it contains only the two generations of parents and children. The _____ is a grouping consisting of all kin. The _____ consists of several related nuclear families or family members who live in the same household,

street or area and who see one another regularly. The _____ is one where related nuclear families, although they may be living far apart, maintain close relations made possible by modern communications, such as car travel, phone, letters or e-mail. This is probably the most common type of family arrangement in Britain today.

The _____ is today largely a result of the rise in the divorce rate, although it may also arise from the death of a partner, the breakdown of cohabiting relationships, or a simple lack of desire to get married or cohabit. Nine out of ten of these families are headed by women. The _____ is one where one or both partners have been married previously, and they bring with them children of a previous marriage.

It remains a popular impression that most families in contemporary Britain are _____, where both husbands and wives or cohabiting partners are likely to be wage earners, and to share the housework and childcare. However, some argue men still dominate in the family and make most of the decisions, and it therefore remains _____.

_____ is the only legal form of marriage allowed in Britain. In modern Britain, most of Western Europe and the USA there are high rates of divorce and remarriage, and some people keep marrying and divorcing a series of different partners. The term _____ is sometimes used to describe these marriage patterns. This type of marriage pattern has been described as 'one at a time, one after the other and they don't last long'!

_____ are those where parents organize the marriages of their children to try and ensure a good match with partners of a similar background and status. They are typically found among Muslim, Sikh and Hindu minority ethnic groups. However, this custom in Britain is coming under pressure, as younger people demand greater freedom to choose their own marriage partner, as happens in wider society.

While marrying a second partner without divorcing the first is a crime in Britain, in many societies it is perfectly acceptable to have more than one marriage partner at the same time. _____ is a general term used to describe this form of marriage.

Is the nuclear family a universal institution?

Functionalist writers like Murdock suggest that the nuclear family is such an important social institution, playing such vital functions in maintaining society, that it is found in some form in every society. In other words, it is a universal institution. However, although most societies in the world have some established arrangements for the production, rearing and socialization of children, this does not mean that these arrangements always or necessarily involve the prime responsibility resting on the family or biological parents. The following examples help to illustrate some alternative arrangements which suggest the family is not always the main way of bringing up children, nor does it necessarily have to be the family that does this.

The Nayar

Among the Nayar of south-west India before the nineteenth century, there was no nuclear family. A woman could have sexual relations with any man she wished (up to a maximum of twelve) and the biological father of children was therefore uncertain. The mother's brother, rather than the biological father, was responsible for looking after the mother and her children. Unlike our society, where in most cases the biological parents marry, live together and are responsible for rearing their children, among the Nayar there was no direct link between having sexual relations, child bearing, child rearing and cohabitation.

Communes

Communes are self-contained and self-supporting communities.

They developed in Western Europe, Britain and the USA in the 1960s, among groups of people wanting to develop alternative lifestyles to conventional society's because of the political or religious beliefs they held.

Communes often try to develop an alternative style of living and a kind of alternative household, with the emphasis on collective living rather than individual family units. A number of adults and children all aim to live and work together, with children being seen as the responsibility of the group as a whole rather than of natural parents. Many communes tended to be very short-lived, and only a few remain in Britain today.

The kibbutz

The Israeli **kibbutz** is a form of commune, and is one of the most famous and successful attempts to establish an alternative to the family. Here, the emphasis is on collective child rearing, with the community as a whole taking over the tasks of the family.

In the early kibbutzim, child rearing was separated as much as possible from the marriage relationship, with children kept apart from their natural parents for much of the time and brought up in the children's house by *metapelets*. These were a kind of 'professional parent' combining the roles of nurse, housemother and educator. The role of the natural parents was extremely limited, and they were only allowed to see their children for short periods each day. The children were seen as the 'children of the kibbutz' – they were the responsibility of the community as a whole, which met all of their needs. Children would move through a series of children's houses with others of the same age group until they reached adulthood.

In recent years, the more traditional family unit has re-emerged in the kibbutzim, with natural parents and children sharing the same accommodation, but the kibbutz remains one of the most important attempts to find an alternative to conventional family structures.

Lone-parent families

The lone-parent family is becoming increasingly common in Western societies, and is usually headed by a woman. Lone parents represent a clear alternative to the conventional nuclear family. This is discussed later in this chapter.

Gay and lesbian families

Same-sex couples are becoming more common, though they are still relatively rare. Most same-sex couples with children tend to be lesbian couples. However, there are more cases emerging of gay male couples adopting children or having children through surrogate mothers. In May 1999, the Canadian Supreme Court declared that gay couples are no different from heterosexual couples in their ability to share loving relationships, and suffer tragic breakdowns in those relationships like many heterosexual couples. In April 2001 in Amsterdam, Europe's first officially blessed gay weddings took place, as Dutch law granted full equality to homosexual couples on issues such as adoption, inheritance, pension rights and tax. Britain has a long way to go before it reaches the Dutch position, but the Dutch experience may well be paving the way for greater change and acceptance of gay marriage and family life in the European Union. An indication of this change was the introduction by Ken Livingstone, mayor of London, in 2001 of partnership registration ceremonies in London for lesbian and gay couples.

You might argue that gay and lesbian couples are families like any other, but they do offer an alternative to more conventional views of the nuclear family.

Foster care and children's homes

It is worth remembering that a considerable number of children are brought up by foster parents or in children's homes. This does demonstrate that the link between natural parents and the rearing of children can be, and sometimes is, separated.

Even though the nuclear family is probably one of the main means of bringing up children in the world today, the examples above mean it would be incorrect to assume that the conventional nuclear family is a universal institution. This is particularly the case today, where new forms of relationship are developing, and where

the idea of a lifetime relationship is increasingly diminishing as people have a series of partners during their lifetimes, and abandon traditional styles of family living.

Sociological perspectives on the family

The functionalist perspective

As we saw in the previous chapter, functionalism emphasizes integration and harmony between the different parts of society, and how these parts work together to maintain society. With regard to the family, functionalists see the family as a vital ‘organ’ in maintaining the ‘body’ of society, just as the heart is an important organ in maintaining the human body. Functionalists are interested in the contribution the family makes to satisfying the functional prerequisites, or basic needs, which enable society to survive, and how the family ‘fits’ with other social institutions (like education or work) so that society functions efficiently and harmoniously.

Murdock argues there are four main functions of the family:

- *Sexual* – expressing sexuality in a socially approved context (note the social disapproval attached to, for example, incest, adultery and homosexuality in many societies).
- *Reproduction* – the family providing some stability for the reproduction and rearing of children.
- *Socialization* – the family is an important unit of primary socialization of children, where children learn socially acceptable behaviour and the culture of their society. This helps to build the shared ideas and beliefs (value consensus) which functionalists regard as important to maintaining a stable society.
- *Economic* – the family provides food and shelter for family members.

Murdock argues these functions are necessary in any society, and he suggested the nuclear family was found in every society to carry them out. However, as has already been seen, the nuclear family is not the only form of arrangement possible for carrying out these functions, and other institutions and arrangements can and do take them over.

Parsons is an American functionalist writer who examined family life in the 1950s. He argued there are two basic functions of the family that are found in every society. These are the primary socialization of children and the stabilization of human personalities.

The primary socialization of children

Primary socialization refers to socialization during the early years of childhood (contrasted with **secondary socialization**, when other social institutions exert an ever-increasing influence on the individual, such as the school, the peer group and the mass media).

Parsons argues this primary socialization involves the learning and internalization of society's culture, such as the language, history and values of a society. He claims society would cease to exist unless the new generation were socialized into accepting the basic norms and values of society. In his view, this socialization in the family is so powerful that society's culture actually becomes part of the individual's personality – people are moulded in terms of the central values of the culture and act in certain ways almost without thinking about it. Parsons therefore argues families are factories producing human personalities, and only the family can provide the emotional warmth and security to achieve this.

The stabilization of human personalities

In industrial societies, the need for work and money, the lack of power and independence and boredom at work, and the pressure to achieve 'success' and support the family all threaten to destabilize personalities. Parsons suggests the family helps to stabilize personalities by the sexual division of labour in the family.

The **sexual division of labour** refers to the way jobs are divided into 'men's jobs' and 'women's jobs'.

Parsons argues women's role in the family is **expressive**, providing warmth, security and emotional support to children and husband. The husband carries out an **instrumental role** as family breadwinner, which leads to stress and anxiety and threatens to destabilize his personality. However, the wife's expressive role relieves this tension by providing love and understanding: the sexual division of labour into 'expressive' and 'instrumental' roles therefore contributes to the stabilization of human personalities.

Criticisms of the functionalist perspective

Both Murdock and Parsons paint very 'rosy' pictures of family life, presenting it as a harmonious and integrated institution. However, they downplay conflict in the family, particularly the 'darker side' of family life, such as child abuse and violence against women. Children may become emotionally disturbed by conflict between parents, and children may often be used as scapegoats by parents.

Scapegoats get blamed for things that aren't their fault.

Parsons's view of the 'instrumental' and 'expressive' roles of men and women is very old-fashioned. It may have held some truth in the 1950s when many married women were full-time housewives, and men the breadwinners in most households. However, this is clearly not the case today, when most married women are wage-earning breadwinners. Nowadays, both partners are likely to be playing

expressive and instrumental roles at various times, especially if men are taking on greater responsibilities for childcare as we are sometimes led to believe.

Functionalists tend to ignore the way women suffer from the sexual division of labour in the family, with their responsibility for housework and childcare undermining their position in paid employment, through restricted working hours due to the need to prepare children's meals, take them to and from school, and look after them when they are ill. Housework also causes stress, which can lead to mental illness. These concerns are typically raised by feminist writers, discussed below.

Leach argues that, in modern industrial society, the nuclear family has become so isolated from kin and the wider community (this is called **privatization**) that it has become an inward-looking institution that leads to emotional stress. Family members expect and demand too much from one another, and this stress generates conflict within the family. He argues that 'Far from being the basis of the good society, the family, with its narrow privacy and tawdry secrets, is the source of all our discontents.'

Writers like Laing and Cooper argue the family can be a destructive and exploitative institution, and Laing sees family life as one of the factors causing the mental illness schizophrenia among young people. Both writers argue family life stunts individual development, and the smothering of individuality leads to unquestioning obedience to authority in later life.

These criticisms of the functionalist approach suggest we need to think more carefully about the way family life is actually experienced by family members, and particularly to take into account the 'darker side' of family life.

Don't forget you can also criticize the functionalist approach by referring to arguments drawn from other perspectives – like the Marxist and feminist approaches discussed below.

The Marxist perspective

Like functionalists, Marxists adopt a *structural perspective* on the family, looking at how the family contributes to the maintenance of society's structure. However, unlike functionalists, Marxists do not regard the nuclear family as a functionally necessary (and therefore universal) institution. Marxists see the family within the framework of a capitalist society, which is based on private property, driven by profit, and riddled with conflict between social classes with opposing interests. Marxists argue that the nuclear family is concerned with teaching its members to submit to the capitalist class. Marxists emphasize the ways the family reproduces unequal relationships, and works to damp down inevitable social conflict.

Early Marxists like Engels (1820–95) believed that the monogamous nuclear family developed as a means of passing on private property to heirs. The family, coupled with monogamy, was an ideal mechanism, as it provided proof of paternity (who the father was) and so property could be passed on to the right people. Woman's position in this family was not much different from that of a

prostitute – providing sex and heirs in return for the economic security her husband provided.

Althusser, a French Marxist writing in 1971, argued that in order for capitalism to survive, the working class must submit to the ruling class or bourgeoisie. He suggested that the family is one of the main means, along with others such as the education system and the mass media, of passing on the ideology (the ideas and beliefs) of the ruling class. Through socialization into this ideology in the family, the ruling class tries to maintain false class consciousness by winning the hearts and minds of the working class.

Marxist feminist and radical feminist perspectives on the family

In recent years, feminist writers have probably had more influence on the study of the family than any other perspective. Feminist perspectives are often a more critical development of Marxist views of the family, focusing particularly on the role of the family in the continuing oppression of women. They emphasize the harmful effects of family life upon women.

Not all feminist writings use a Marxist perspective. Many radical feminist writers see patriarchy as the main obstacle to women's freedom – a system of male power and dominance.

Feminist approaches have been extremely valuable in introducing new areas into the study of the family, such as housework and its contribution to the economy; domestic violence; the negative effects of family life on women's careers in paid employment; and the continuing inequality between men and women in the family.

Some of the feminist criticisms of the family are covered in more detail in later sections of this chapter on changes in the family. The following represents a brief outline of the key features of feminist approaches to the family.

Themes in feminist analysis of the family

The family, and particularly women's work in the family, contributes to the maintenance of capitalism in the following ways.

The social reproduction of labour power

The social reproduction of labour power simply means the family provides a place where children can be born and raised with a sense of security, and the ruling class is supplied with a readily available and passive labour force for its factories and offices. The family achieves this in three ways:

- By providing a place for eating, drinking and relaxing, which helps to ensure that members of the workforce are able to go to work each day with their ability to work (their labour power) renewed.
- By producing and maintaining labour which is free of cost to the capitalists through the unpaid housework of women (what is called **domestic labour**),

- as women are not paid for their labour in rearing and maintaining children and male partners.
- By socializing children into the dominant ideas in society (the dominant ideology), and preparing them for the necessity and routines of work, such as the need to work for a living, and punctuality and obedience at work. Through day-to-day relationships in the family, such as parents having power and control over their children, and men over women, family members come to accept, often without questioning them, the power inequalities they will face in 'adult' capitalist society. The family therefore lays the groundwork for submission to 'the boss' in later life, and is one of the mechanisms by which capitalism produces and recruits a moulded and obedient workforce.

Social control of the working class

Social control refers to the means of keeping people conforming to the dominant norms and values of society. The expectation that 'good parents' must work to provide material comforts and good life chances for their children helps to keep workers in unsatisfying, boring and unrewarding jobs. It is harder for workers to go on strike for higher pay if there is a family to support, as it might mean cuts in the living standards of themselves and their children. This weakens workers' bargaining power at work, and discourages them from taking action that might disrupt the system.

The family can also act as a 'safety valve', providing a release from the tedium, frustration and lack of power and control at work that many workers experience. The family can be a place to escape from the world and relax – a 'sanctuary' into which adults withdraw to recover, and this helps them to avoid frustration at work spilling over into taking action against the system. This contributes to the stabilization of the capitalist system, to the benefit of the dominant class.

The family as a place of work

Feminist writers were among the first to state that housework is work – as 'real' as waged work outside the home. Housework and childcare in the family, which are mainly performed by women, are unpaid, and not really recognized as work at all. Men are often the ones who gain from this, as it is they who have their meals cooked, their children looked after and their homes kept clean by women's work. Oakley has emphasized that housework is hard, routine and unrewarding (both personally and in a financial sense), and housework remains the primary responsibility of women, though men might sometimes 'help'. This will be examined later in this chapter.

The myth of the 'symmetrical family'

Feminists attack the notion (put forward originally by Young and Willmott in *The Symmetrical Family* (1973)) that there is growing equality between partners

in the family. These issues are discussed later in this chapter, but feminists emphasize it is still mainly women who:

- perform most housework and childcare tasks.
- make sacrifices to buy the children clothes, and to make sure other family members are properly fed.
- are less likely to make the most important decisions in the family.
- are more likely to be dependent on men's earnings, as the average pay of women is only about 80 per cent of that of men.
- are more likely to give up paid work, or suffer from lost or restricted job opportunities, to look after children, the old, the sick and husbands. Many women now work both outside the home in paid employment *and* inside the home doing domestic labour. In effect, they have two jobs to the husband's one.
- are more likely to be the victims of domestic violence by men.

Feminist approaches to the family provide a healthy antidote to functionalist accounts, which tend to emphasize the 'functional' aspects of the family and downplay the negative side of family life. For feminists, the family and marriage are major sources of female oppression and gender inequalities in society – whether we examine housework, childcare, power and authority or women's employment outside the home.

Table 2.2 summarizes functionalist, Marxist feminist and radical feminist perspectives on the family.

Table 2.2 Sociological perspectives on the family

Functionalism	Marxist feminism	Radical feminism
The family meets the needs of society by socializing children into shared norms and values, leading to social harmony and stability.	The family meets the needs of capitalism by socializing children into ruling class norms and values (the ruling class ideology), leading to a submissive and obedient workforce, with false consciousness, and stability for capitalism.	The family meets the needs of patriarchy by socializing children into traditional gender roles, with men as 'breadwinners' and women as responsible for housework and childcare.
The family is a social institution providing security for the conception, birth and nurture of new members of society.	The family is a social institution responsible for the reproduction of labour power for capitalism.	The family is a social institution responsible for the reproduction of unequal roles for women and men.

Table 2.2 (cont'd)

Functionalism	Marxist feminism	Radical feminism
The sexual division of labour in the family, with men performing instrumental roles and women performing expressive roles, stabilizes adult personalities and thereby helps to maintain a stable society.	The male's instrumental role as wage earner maintains the family, pays for the reproduction of labour power and acts as a strong control on workers' behaviour in the workplace, thereby helping to maintain the stability of an unequal, exploitative capitalist society.	The sexual division of labour in the family exploits women, since their responsibilities for domestic labour and childcare are unpaid, undermines their position in paid employment, and increases dependency on men. It thereby maintains an unequal patriarchal society.
The family is a supportive and generally harmonious and happy social institution.	The family is an oppressive institution that stunts the development of human personalities and individuality. There is a 'dark side' to family life that functionalist accounts play down.	The family is an oppressive institution that benefits men and exploits women. There is a 'dark side' to family life that includes violence and abuse against women and children.

Activity

Refer to table 2.2 and to the following statements, and classify each one as nearly as possible as functionalist, Marxist, Marxist feminist or radical feminist. Give a brief justification of your reasons in each case.

- 1 The family is a socially useful and happy institution providing the best context for bringing up children.
- 2 The family is an important institution because of its contribution to maintaining social stability.
- 3 The family is a patriarchal and unequal institution controlled by and for men.
- 4 Children are socialized by the family and other institutions to conform to the dominant ideology.
- 5 Only the family provides the warmth, security and emotional support necessary to keep society stable.
- 6 Patterns of obedience laid down in the family form the basis for acceptance of the hierarchy of power and control in capitalist society.
- 7 Women's role in the family is to do housework, to care for children, the sick and the elderly, and to flatter, excuse, sympathize and pay attention to men. This often disadvantages women in many aspects of their lives.
- 8 The family always benefits either men or capitalism.

- 9 The image of the caring and loving family ignores the violence against women and the sexual crimes, like rape within marriage, which go on there.
 - 10 The family exists primarily to pass on private property from one generation to the next, and to prepare a submissive and obedient workforce.
 - 11 The family is an important institution in maintaining male power.
 - 12 When wives play their traditional role as 'takers of shit', they often absorb their husbands' anger and frustration at their own powerlessness and oppression in the world of work, and stop rebellion in the workplace.
 - 13 Families are factories producing stable human personalities.
 - 14 It is highly unlikely that any society will find an adequate substitute to take over the functions of the nuclear family.
 - 15 Women's unpaid domestic labour reproduces the workforce at no cost to the capitalist.
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Changes in the family in Britain

The family in Britain has gone through a number of changes since the beginnings of industrialization, and it continues to change today. The extent of some of these changes thought to have occurred in the family has often been exaggerated and misleading conclusions drawn. The key changes that have commonly been thought to have occurred are discussed below, and summarized in figure 2.1.

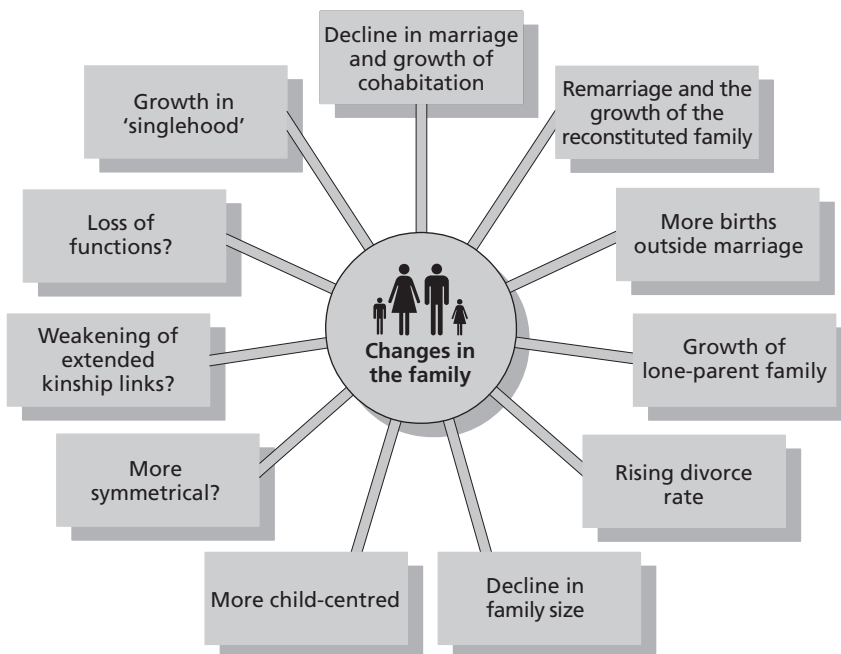


Figure 2.1 Changes in the family

Activity

With reference to figure 2.1 on the previous page, discuss with different generations, such as friends, parents and grandparents or great-grandparents, how the family has changed during the course of the last fifty years. If you are in a group, pool all your findings and discuss the changes you have discovered.

Family change 1: has the family lost its functions?

The family in pre-industrial and early industrial Britain and most other societies traditionally had a number of responsibilities placed upon it – these are the functions it performs in society. They are primarily concerned with its role in the preparation of children to fit into adult society.

The case for the view the family has lost its functions

Functionalist writers like Parsons argue that with the process of industrialization, many of the functions once performed by the family in pre-industrial society have been removed from the family, and transferred to other institutions, such as the welfare state and the education system. Parsons calls this process structural differentiation.

Structural differentiation means that new, more specialized, social institutions have emerged which focus on fewer functions.

Parsons argues this process of structural differentiation has meant the modern, more specialized family has only two basic functions left: the primary socialization of children and the stabilization of adult personalities.

The case against the view the family has lost its functions

Sociologists like Fletcher (1966) and Shorter argue the family has not lost many of its functions in modern industrial society. They suggest that in pre- and early industrial society poverty meant functions such as welfare, education or recreation were often not carried out. Children were frequently neglected, and male peasants often cared more about their animals than their wives. Fletcher argues that the family now has more, not fewer, responsibilities (functions) placed on it. For example, the health and welfare functions of the family have been strengthened by the welfare state, and parents today are more preoccupied with their children's health, and retain responsibility for diagnosis of minor illness and referral to doctors and other welfare state agencies. Social services departments, with

their powers to intervene in families if children are neglected, have increased the responsibilities on parents, not reduced them.

Fletcher says that although the family may no longer be a unit of production (where goods are produced), it plays an important economic role as a unit of consumption. The modern family is particularly concerned with raising the living standards of the family and ‘keeping up’ with the neighbours through buying a whole host of goods targeted at family consumers, such as washing machines, stereo systems, video and DVD players, home computers and package holidays. Marxists see this pressure to purchase consumer goods as a means of motivating workers in boring, unfulfilling jobs.

Feminist writers dispute whether the modern family really has ceased to be a unit of production, as women’s unpaid domestic labour (housework and child-care) produces a wide range of goods and services in the family, which would prove very expensive if they were provided and paid for outside the family.

The discussion of whether or not the family has lost its functions is outlined in table 2.3.

Table 2.3 The changing functions of the family

Traditional functions of the family	How they have changed
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The reproduction and nurturing of children was often seen as the main reason for marriage, as a means of passing on family property and providing a future workforce.■ Before industrialization and the growth of factory production in Britain, the family was a unit of production. This means that the family home was also the workplace, and the family produced most of the goods necessary for its own survival. Children would learn the skills needed for working life from their parents, and the family ascribed the occupational roles and status of adults. In other words, children generally followed in their parents’ footsteps.■ The family traditionally played the major role in caring for dependent children – that is, those children who were still	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ There has been a steady increase in the reproduction of children and sexual relations before, alongside and outside marriage.■ Since the early nineteenth century in Britain, work has moved outside the home, in factories and offices. Families do not generally produce the goods they need any more – they go out to work for wages so they can buy them. The skills required for adult working life are no longer learnt in the family, but at the place of work, at colleges or on government-supported job training schemes. Occupational roles and status in society are less likely to be ascribed by the kinship network than achieved by individual merit.■ The modern nuclear family gets more help and assistance to maintain its children through a wide range of state welfare services, like child benefit, the

Table 2.3 (cont'd)

Traditional functions of the family	How they have changed
<p>unable to look after themselves. Before the twentieth century in Britain, many children were poorly looked after because of poverty.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The family used to have the main responsibility for health and welfare provision for the young, the old, the sick, the disabled, the unemployed and the poor.■ The primary and secondary socialization and social control of children, and their education, used to be performed mainly by the family and close community. Before compulsory schooling was provided by the state in Britain from 1880, many children from working-class families had extremely high illiteracy rates.	<p>social services, and growing numbers of pre- and after-school clubs, playgroups and nurseries.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The welfare state (established in the 1940s) has taken on some of these responsibilities. The NHS, social services departments and other agencies of the welfare state, plus a range of welfare benefits, reduce the dependence on kin for money and support when misfortune strikes.■ The family still retains important responsibilities for the socialization, social control and education of young children. However, nurseries, playgroups and the state educational system now help the family with these functions, and the mass media also play an important socializing role. Education is now primarily the responsibility of professional teachers rather than parents, although the family still continues to play an important role in supporting children at school. The family still has important influences on how well a child does at school.

Activity

- 1 To what extent do you consider the family has lost its functions? Examine the arguments in table 2.3, weigh up the strengths and weaknesses of each one and reach a conclusion. (This is *evaluation*.)
- 2 Do you think the welfare state has placed more or fewer demands on the family? Give reasons for your answer.
- 3 Look at TV, newspapers or magazine advertising. Can you find any evidence that the image of family life presented in advertising is used as a way of persuading people to buy consumer goods – for example, by making it appear that buying goods will lead to happier lives, or will make children feel more cared for? If you're in a group, collect or record some adverts and discuss them in your group.
- 4 Do you have any evidence from your own experience of families buying goods to keep up with the neighbours? If so, why do you think they do this?

Family change 2: the decline of the classic extended family and the emergence of the privatized nuclear family?

A second major change in the family to consider is a traditional view that the main form of the family in Britain changed from the classic extended family before industrialization to the privatized nuclear family today. The privatized nuclear family (sometimes called the ‘structurally isolated’ family) means the nuclear family as a very private institution, separated and isolated from its extended kin, and often from neighbours and local community life as well. It has become a self-contained, self-reliant and home-centred unit, with free time spent doing jobs around the house, and leisure time mainly spent with the family.

The three stages of family life: the work of
Young and Willmott in *The Symmetrical Family*

Young and Willmott, in *The Symmetrical Family* (1973), argue that the British family has passed through three main historical stages as industrial society develops:

- *Stage 1* was the pre-industrial family. Then, the family was a stable unit, the home and the workplace were combined – the family was a unit of production – and the family was patriarchal, with power and authority held by men.
- *Stage 2* was the early industrial extended family, in the period around 1750–1900. As home and workplace were separated, the family ceased to be a unit of production. Traditional family life was torn apart as family members were forced to move to work to earn their living in the new industrial towns. Conditions of life for the working class were generally grim in the new industrial towns, with unemployment and poverty widespread. The family responded to working-class poverty by extending itself as a support network when faced with hardship and unemployment.
- *Stage 3* involves the transition to the privatized, symmetrical nuclear family of today. This transition began around 1900 and represents a family that is once again stable after the disruptive effects of industrialization. This stage 3 symmetrical family has strong bonds between marriage partners, with the relationship becoming more symmetrical, or equal on both sides. Both partners share household chores, childcare and decision-making, and both partners are more likely to be involved in paid employment. Whether the modern family really is ‘symmetrical’ is discussed later in this chapter.

Writers like Parsons, Young and Willmott and Fletcher have suggested that it was the industrialization process which brought about these changes, and that the structurally isolated, privatized nuclear family or some form of modified extended family emerged as the main family form in industrial society. Parsons argues this is because this form is well adapted to meet both the needs of industrial society and the needs of individuals.

There are six main reasons why there is thought to have been a decline in extended family life, with the isolated nuclear family ‘fitting’ industrial society.

The need in industrial societies for geographical mobility

Modern industrial society has a specialized **division of labour** – a wide range of different occupations with different incomes and lifestyles.

This means the labour force needs to be geographically mobile – to be able to move about around the country to areas where those skills are required, to improve their education or gain promotion. This often involves leaving relatives behind, thus weakening and breaking up traditional extended family life. The isolated nuclear family is ideally suited to this requirement because it is small in size and it is not tied down by responsibilities for extended kin who, in earlier times, might have been living with them.

The higher rate of social mobility in industrial societies

Social mobility means that people can move up or down the social scale from the family they were born into. Rates of social mobility are higher in industrial societies. This means that different members of the extended family may find themselves in different jobs, with differences in education, income, lifestyle, opportunities, and attitudes and values between kin. These differences weaken relations between kin, as they have less in common.

*The growth in people’s wealth and income as society has got richer
and the welfare state has developed*

People have become much better off in industrial society, and the welfare state has taken over a number of functions previously performed by the family, such as in education, health care and welfare. This has reduced the dependence on kin for support in times of distress. This further weakens the extended family.

The growth in meritocracy in industrial societies

A **meritocracy** is a society where occupational status is mainly achieved on the basis of talent, skill and educational qualifications, rather than whom you know or the family you were born into.

It is *what* you know, rather than *whom* you know, that is the most important factor in getting jobs in industrial society. Extended kin therefore have less to offer family members, such as job opportunities, reducing reliance on kin. However, while this is true for most people, kin links remain very important in the upper class, for the inheritance of wealth and for access to the top ‘elite’ jobs.

The need to avoid the possibility of economic and status differences in an extended family unit causing conflict and family instability

The different occupations, incomes, lifestyles and statuses of extended family members who lived together might be a source of family conflict and instability in an industrial society. In an extended family unit, conflicts might arise over where to live when different job opportunities arise, and over different incomes and lifestyles in the same family unit. The fact that adult children generally move away from the family home in industrial societies to establish their own separate nuclear family units avoids such potential problems.

The need to protect family stability by strengthening the bonds between marriage partners

There is a lack of support from kin in the isolated nuclear family, and Parsons argues this helps to cement family relationships through increasing the mutual dependency of marriage partners. This increases the stabilization of adult personalities, which are under particular stress in the face of the impersonal competitive relations of the wider industrial society. Young and Willmott suggest rising living standards have made the home a more attractive place to spend time, and family life has become more home-centred. Free time is spent by both partners doing jobs around the home, watching TV and so on, and the family becomes a self-contained and more intimate unit.

Criticisms

The view that the typical family unit in pre-industrial Britain was the extended family, and that the industrialization process led to the emergence of the isolated nuclear family as the main family form, has been criticized on three main grounds.

The typical family before industrialization was never the extended family: the work of Laslett

Laslett, an historian, found there was no evidence to support the view that the classic extended family was widespread in pre-industrial England. He found that between 1564 and 1821, only 10 per cent of households contained kin beyond the nuclear family, and family size was not that different from that in Britain in the 1960s. Although households were larger in pre-industrial Britain, this was often because they contained non-family members, like domestic servants. Laslett suggests that it was not industrialization that produced the nuclear family, but, on the contrary, that the industrialization process was able to proceed more easily because the nuclear family was so common, and fitted neatly with the requirements of the emerging industrial society.

In the early stages of industrialization, the extended family became more common: the work of Anderson

Based on historical research he carried out in Preston, Anderson suggested that far from encouraging the formation of nuclear families, the early stages of industrialization in England may well have strengthened kinship ties beyond the nuclear family, and encouraged the formation of extended families, especially in the working class. In the absence of the welfare state, and with high unemployment, large families, a high death rate and overcrowded housing, the maintenance of a large kinship network was necessary, as individuals were largely dependent on kin for help in times of hardship and need. The extended family was strengthened as a self-help institution, providing support for the aged, childcare while mothers worked, and help with house rents and with finding work. This was also found in Young and Willmott's stage 2 early industrial family.

There is no 'typical' family type in industrial society

While there may be some evidence that nuclear families have become more common in industrial societies, it would be wrong to suggest that extended family life has disappeared in industrial societies, and it is still of great importance in parts of modern Britain. For example, extended families are still found in traditional working-class communities, where children often remain in the same area as adults. Members of the extended family live close together in such communities, meeting frequently, and there is a constant exchange of services between extended family members, such as washing, shopping and childcare between female kin, and shared work and leisure activities between male relatives. Such extended family life declined in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in the 1990s, as traditional industries closed down and people were forced to move away in search of new employment.

The extended family is still very common in the Asian community, among those who came to Britain in the 1960s and 1970s from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

We must also recognize that a growing number of people are reaching old age and often living well into their eighties. This means there is an increase in the number of extended three- and four-generation families, with more children growing up in extended families alongside several of their grandparents and even great-grandparents. This return of the extended family can only be expected to increase with the growing numbers of the elderly.

There is also a wide diversity (or range) of family structures besides the isolated nuclear family. The issue of family diversity is discussed later in this chapter.

Conclusion: the modified extended family

While it is true that most families with dependent children in Britain today are nuclear families, we must not assume that, just because family members may live

apart geographically, all links with kin are severed and destroyed. Kin beyond the nuclear family still play an important part in the lives of many families, particularly in the early years of marriage when homes are purchased or rented and children arrive. We might therefore conclude that the typical family unit in industrial society is not simply extended or nuclear, but a modified form of the extended family. This modified extended family, as Litwak called it, is one where related nuclear families, although they may be living far apart geographically, nevertheless maintain regular contact and mutual support through e-mail, letter writing, telephone and visiting, made possible by modern communications and easy transportation. This is probably the most common type of family arrangement in Britain today.

Figure 2.2 summarizes the debates above, and also a range of other changes in the family which are often linked with the move from a pre-industrial to a modern industrial society.

Write a short essay of about one and a half sides on the following:

Critically assess the view that the nuclear family is ideally suited to the needs of an industrial society.

(Note: give arguments and evidence for and against, and reach a conclusion.)

Question

Family change 3: the emergence of the symmetrical family?

Is there more equality between partners in marriage today, or does the family remain a patriarchal, male-dominated unit? There is a common belief that, since the middle of the twentieth century, the relations between male and female partners in the family in Britain have become less patriarchal, or male-dominated, and much more a 'partnership of equals'. The assumption has been that there has been a change from segregated conjugal roles to more integrated conjugal roles.

Segregated conjugal roles show a clear division and separation between the male and female roles.

Integrated (or joint) **conjugal roles** show few divisions between male and female partners' roles.

Conjugal roles simply mean the roles played by a male and female partner in marriage or in a cohabiting relationship.

Young and Willmott called this more equally balanced relationship the symmetrical family.

This greater equality in marriage or cohabiting relationships is often thought to be shown by women taking on more 'men's work' (especially working outside the home) and men doing 'women's work' (housework, shopping and childcare),

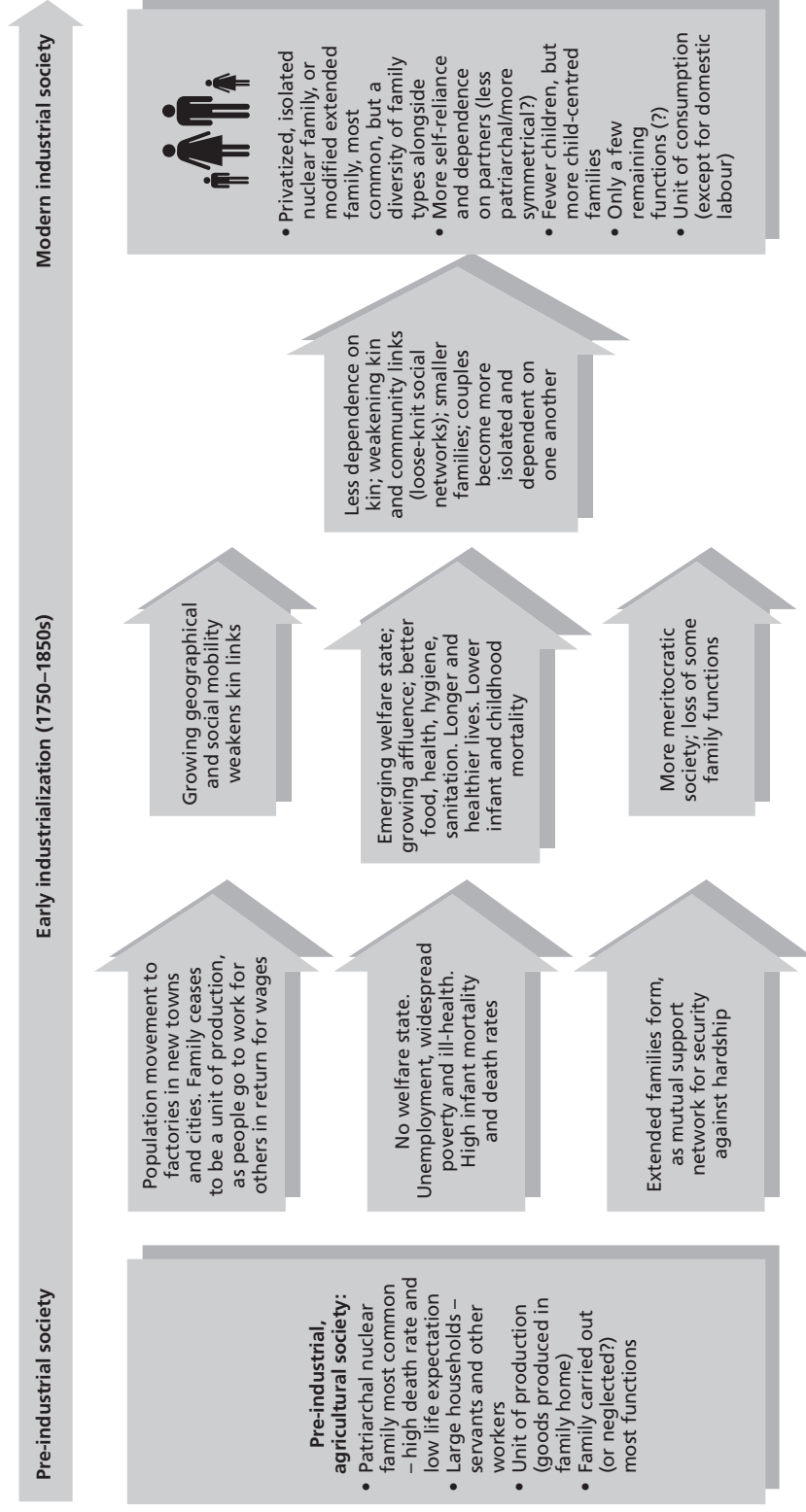


Figure 2.2 The family and industrialization

with shared leisure and decision-making. This was often combined with discussion, mainly in the mass media, about the emergence of the ‘new man’, who was more caring, sharing, gentle, and committed to doing his fair share of housework and childcare.

What causes these apparent changes?

The growing equality in family relationships which is thought to be occurring is often explained by several factors:

- Improved living standards in the home, such as central heating, TV, videos and stereos, and all the other modern consumer goods, have encouraged husbands and wives, or cohabiting couples, to become more home-centred, building the relationship and the home.
- The decline of the close-knit extended family and greater geographical and social mobility in industrial society have meant there is less pressure from kin on newly married or cohabiting couples to retain traditional roles – it is therefore easier to adopt new roles in a relationship. There are often no longer the separate male and female networks (of friends and especially kin) for male and female partners to mix with. This increases their dependence upon each other, and may mean men and women who adopt new roles avoid being teased by friends who knew them before they got married or started cohabiting (see Bott’s research below).
- The improved status and rights of women encourage men to accept women more as equals and not simply as housewives and mothers.
- The increase in the number of women working in paid employment has increased women’s independence and authority in the family. Where the female partner has her own income, she is less dependent on her male partner, and she therefore has more power and authority. Decision-making is thus more likely to be shared.
- The importance of the female partner’s earnings in maintaining the family’s standard of living may have encouraged men to help more with housework – a recognition that the woman cannot be expected to do two jobs at once.

Elizabeth Bott, *Family and Social Network* (1957)

Bott tried to explain the apparent changes in conjugal roles. Although her research is old, the theoretical aspects of her work still have some use today.

Bott found that the most important factor that influenced whether couples had segregated or integrated conjugal roles was the social network of friends, kin and acquaintances built up by each partner before marriage. Where couples had a tight-knit network, where the members of the network knew each other well and were in regular contact, this helped to reinforce the separation between men and women’s roles. Both husband and wife or

cohabiting partners had people of their own sex for companionship or help with household tasks, the closeness of the network acted as a form of social control on the couple, and things such as teasing prevented the couple drifting from ‘traditional’ segregated roles. By contrast, a loose-knit network would make movement towards more role integration easier, as those constraints would be removed.

Using Bott’s framework, one would expect that the geographical and social mobility of industrial societies would lead to looser social networks, more reliance on the partners in the relationship, and therefore more role integration.

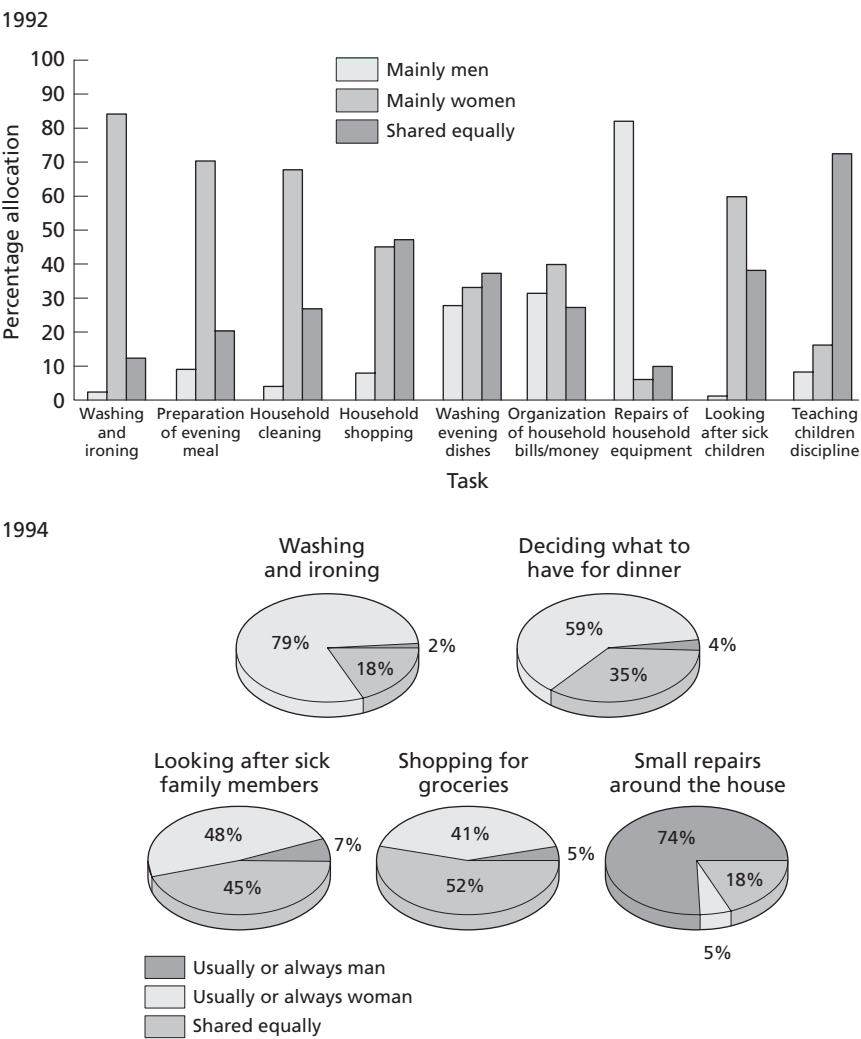


Figure 2.3 Household division of labour among married or cohabiting couples: various years
Source: based on data from British Social Attitudes Surveys (1992, 1994), *Social Trends* (1997) and *British and European Social Attitudes Report* (1998)

Criticisms of the view that modern marriages and cohabiting relationships are really more equal

The view that there is more equality in modern family relationships has been subject to very strong criticism, particularly by feminist writers, and there is not really much evidence that the family is now typically ‘symmetrical’. The following section summarizes several of these criticisms.

Inequalities in the division of labour in the household

Evidence from a number of surveys, including the British Social Attitudes surveys (see figure 2.3), suggests that women still perform the majority of domestic tasks around the home, even when they have paid jobs themselves. This

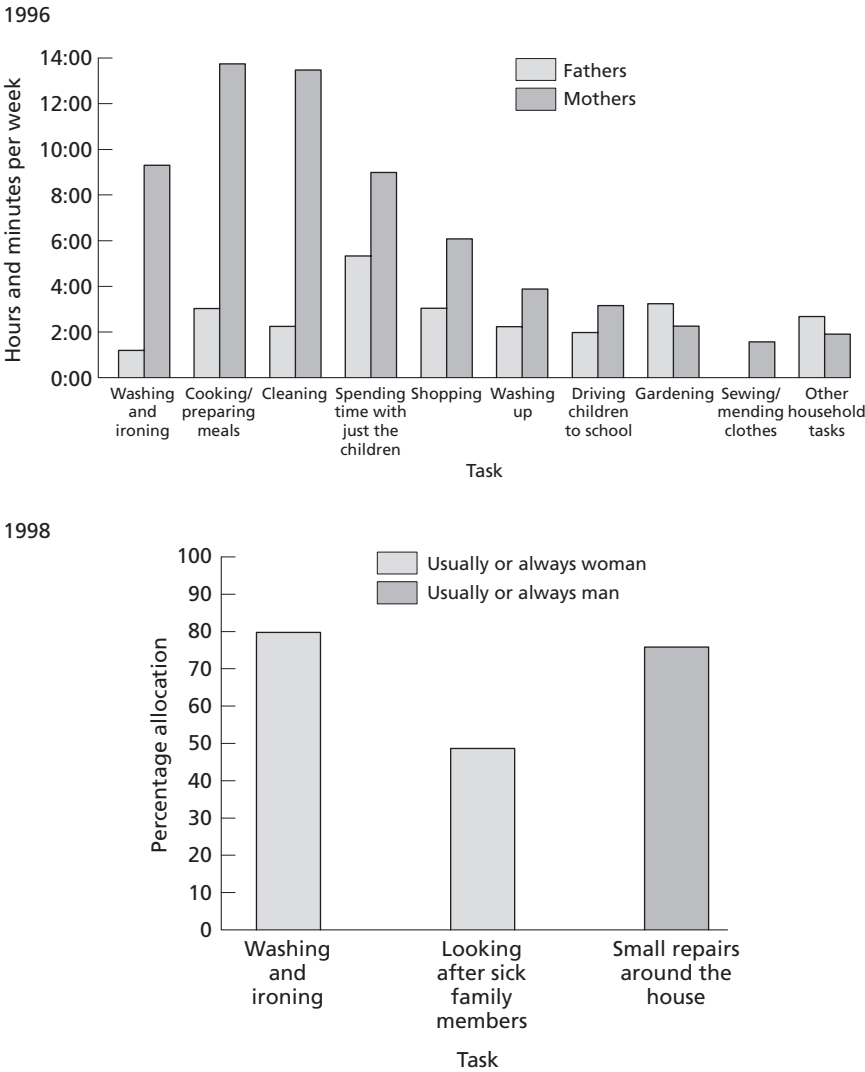


Figure 2.3 (cont'd)



Have conjugal roles really become more equal?

is true even among full-time working women, where one would expect to find the greatest degree of equality. Cooking the evening meal, household cleaning, washing and ironing, and caring for sick children are still mainly performed by women. Data published in 1997 by the Office for National Statistics showed that women spent on average nearly twice as long as men each day (five hours) cooking, cleaning, shopping, washing and looking after the children. An Office for National Statistics report in July 2001, *Social Focus on Men*, found women spent three times longer than men doing cooking and routine housework. Housework is the second largest cause of domestic rows, after money.

Crude indicators are often used to measure integrated roles. For example, shared friends are often seen as evidence of 'jointness', but shared friends may mean husband's friends, and involve the wife being cut off from *her* friends, resulting in more dependence on the husband and greater inequality.

Ann Oakley is a feminist sociologist, who did much of the pioneering work on housework and roles in the family in *The Sociology of Housework* (1974). Oakley argues that Young and Willmott's evidence for 'jointness' in *The Symmetrical Family* is totally unconvincing. Seventy-two per cent of married men claimed to 'help their partners in the home in some way other than washing up at least once a week'. As Oakley points out, this could mean anything – a quick Hoover, tucking children into bed, making breakfast occasionally, going out with the children on Saturday mornings, or even a man ironing his own trousers. This is hardly convincing evidence for symmetry or equality in marriage, and fewer than three-quarters of husbands in Young and Willmott's research did even this much.

How representative is the research on conjugal roles?

The extent to which research on conjugal roles can be applied to the whole population is seriously questionable. For example, Bott's research was based on a small sample of 20 families, Oakley's on 40 couples, Boulton's on 50 couples, and Edgell's on 38 couples. Much of this research was based in London. These samples are too small and too specific to London to be applied to the whole country. The only survey which can really claim to be representative of everyone is the British Social Attitudes Survey, which uses much larger samples (around 3000 people) and very careful sampling techniques. These issues are discussed in the final chapter on sociological methods.

Research on families where both partners are working in full-time career jobs, such as Elston's (1980) research on doctors and Rapoport and Rapoport's (1976) study of professional and business couples, suggests that these professional wives are still expected to take major responsibility for dealing with childcare arrangements, sick children, and housework. So women who are in full-time demanding career jobs are still treated primarily as housewives/mothers at home, and this is the group which Young and Willmott argued would be most likely to display symmetry in marriage.

While there is some evidence of more sharing of childcare than household tasks, Mary Boulton suggests many surveys exaggerate how much childcare men really do. She argues that, while men may 'help' with childcare, it is their female partners who take the main responsibility for children, often at the expense of other aspects of their lives, like paid employment. Patriarchal ideology still sees housework and childcare as 'women's work'. As Oakley put it in *The Sociology of Housework*:

As long as the blame is laid on the woman's head for an empty larder or a dirty house it is not meaningful to talk about marriage as a 'joint' or 'equal' partnership. The same holds of parenthood. So long as mothers and not fathers are judged by their children's appearance and behaviour . . . symmetry remains a myth.

Activity

Refer to figure 2.3 on pages 50–1. This shows the results of a series of surveys which were carried out in the 1990s. Then answer the following questions:

- 1 Overall, which household task was most likely to be performed mainly by women?
- 2 Overall, which household task was most likely to be performed by men?
- 3 Who is most likely to look after sick children or other sick family members?
- 4 Taking 1992 and 1994 together, which three household tasks were most likely to be shared equally?
- 5 Which household tasks do fathers spend more time on than mothers?

- 6 When considering whether the time spent on household tasks is fair or not, what other information do you think is required?
 - 7 Outline all the evidence in figure 2.3 which suggests that it is largely a myth that the family is a 'partnership of equals' today.
 - 8 Do a small survey in your own home or in any household where there are children, and find out who performs the various jobs around the home – mainly the man, mainly the woman or shared equally. You might like to investigate whether children do any work.
 - (a) Make a note about whether or not one or both partners are working in paid employment, and whether they do this full- or part-time. Why might this be important information?
 - (b) Use the various tasks included in figure 2.3 to draw up a checklist of jobs. You might also consider some of the following tasks: cleaning floors; cleaning the loo; drawing up the shopping list or working out what's needed when going to the supermarket; changing nappies; bathing the baby; buying children's clothes. You might also consider decision-making in the family, by asking about who finally decides whether to spend a large amount of money (say, over £1000), buy new furniture, whether and where to go on holiday, whether to buy a new car, deciding on colour schemes when redecorating, deciding what plants to put in the garden, and so on. A further aspect to explore might be who takes responsibility for children, such as making sure they have the right gear for school every day, buying them new shoes, arranging parties and so on.
 - (c) Examine your results to see if there is any evidence to suggest family roles are becoming more equal. If you are in a group, bring all the results together and discuss what the evidence shows.
-

The unequal distribution of power and authority in marriage and cohabiting relationships

An important issue to consider when assessing whether there is more equality or not in the family is how much control over decision-making each partner has. Research in this area suggests:

- Most decisions which couples think of as 'very important', such as moving house or taking out loans, are finally taken by men alone. While some decisions are taken jointly, very few are taken by women alone. Edgell, in *Middle-Class Couples*, also found women had sole responsibility for decisions only in relatively unimportant areas like home decoration and furnishing, children's clothes, food and other domestic spending. This was confirmed by a MORI survey conducted for Direct Line Financial Services in June 2000. This found that decisions on major spending (over £1000) were only made jointly between men and women in 53 per cent of cases. Women made only one in ten of the decisions. In many households, men still hold the purse strings.
- Men are still often the major or sole earners. This puts them in a stronger bargaining position than women, and often puts their female partners in a position of economic dependence.

- There is evidence of widespread male violence in relationships (wife-battering), often resorted to when men are drunk and use their power to try to get women to submit to their wishes. Such violence is all too often not taken seriously by the police or courts, being dismissed as a ‘domestic dispute’. This might be interpreted as a view that such violence is almost seen as a ‘normal’ part of a relationship. Violence in the family is discussed later in this chapter.

The effects of housework and childcare on women’s careers

Women’s continuing responsibility for housework and childcare often means women’s careers suffer. Surveys suggest many working women are limited in the jobs they can do and the hours they can work because they are still expected to take the main responsibility for housework and childcare, and to be at home for the children leaving for and returning from school. Women consequently have less pay, less security of employment, and poorer promotion prospects than men, and this reinforces men’s economic superiority and greater authority in the family.

More than four out of five part-time workers are women, and about a third of women in paid employment work only part-time, compared with about 6 per cent of men. The presence of dependent children (under the age of 16) and the age of the youngest child are the most important factors related to whether or not women are in paid employment, and whether they work full- or part-time. Figure 2.4 illustrates the importance of this link between dependent children and part-time status, and provides clear evidence that it is women who retain primary responsibility for childcare.

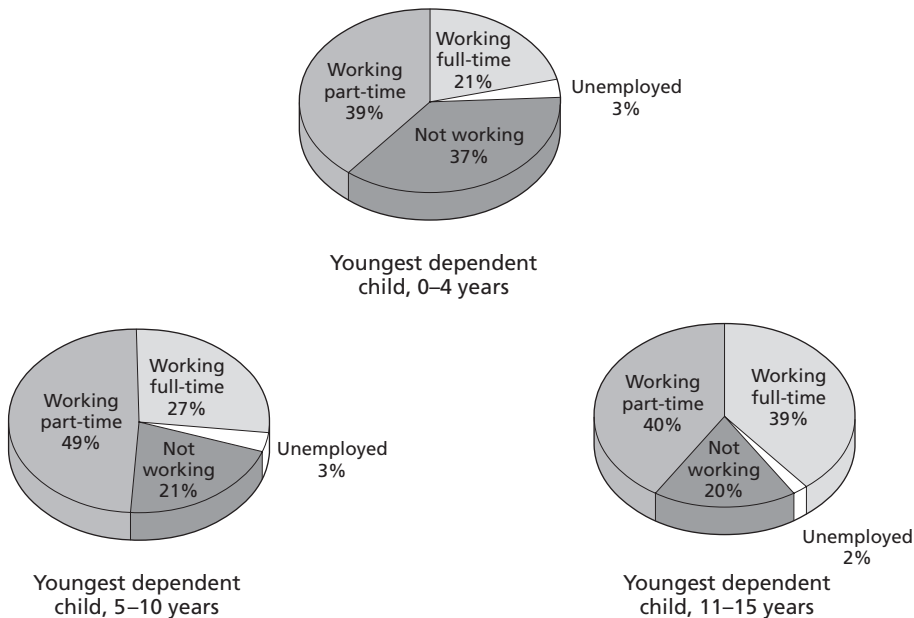


Figure 2.4 Working patterns of married or cohabiting women with young children: United Kingdom, 2000

Source: data from Labour Force Survey

Questions

Refer to figure 2.4 on the previous page:

- 1 What percentage of mothers whose youngest child was aged 0–4 years was not working in 2000?
- 2 Identify two trends which occur as the youngest dependent child gets older.
- 3 What does figure 2.4 indicate might be the main restriction on mothers with young children going out to work? Suggest ways this restriction might be overcome.
- 4 How do you think having young dependent children might affect the working lives of fathers? Give reasons for your answer.

There is still a lot of male prejudice about women in career jobs and senior positions, and women face a number of disadvantages:

- Women who have children are seen as ‘unreliable’ by some employers, because of the assumption they will get pregnant, or be absent to look after sick children.
- Employers are sometimes reluctant to invest in expensive training programmes for women, as they may assume women will leave work eventually to produce and raise children.
- Women with promising careers may have temporarily to leave jobs to have children, and therefore miss out on promotion opportunities. Top jobs require a continuous career pattern in the 20–30 age period – yet these are the usual child-bearing years for women, so while men continue to work and get promoted, women miss their opportunities. Women may also find difficulties in attending meetings, which might give the impression they are less committed to their work, which restricts their promotion opportunities.
- It is mainly women who give up paid work (or suffer from lost/restricted job opportunities) to look after children, the elderly or the sick.
- Married or cohabiting women are still more likely to move house and area for their male partner’s job promotion rather than their own. This means women interrupt their careers and have to start again in a new job, often at a lower level. This means the men are getting promoted at the expense of lost opportunities for their partners.

Domestic Labour

Domestic labour refers to unpaid housework and childcare, and, as seen above, most of this still falls to women. This is a clear inequality between men and women, and this problem is made worse by some of the features of domestic labour that make it different from a paid job. These include no pay, no pensions, no holidays and unlimited working hours. Much of this has been covered in Oakley’s work.

These features of domestic labour are illustrated in figure 2.5. The Office for National Statistics in 1997 calculated that if the time spent on unpaid work in

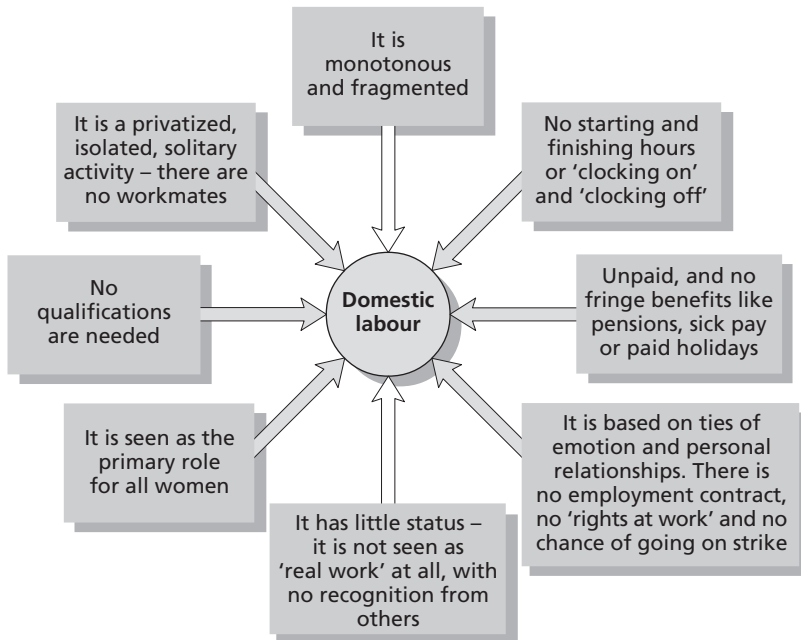


Figure 2.5 How domestic labour differs from paid employment

the home (childcare, washing, ironing, cleaning, shopping and cooking) was valued at the same average pay rates as equivalent jobs in paid employment (for example, if cooking were paid as it is for chefs, or childcare as for nannies and child-minders), it would be worth £739 billion a year.

Refer to figure 2.5:

- 1 Suggest reasons why domestic labour is often not seen as 'real work'.
- 2 Explain what is meant by saying domestic labour 'is seen as the primary role for all women'.
- 3 What might make it difficult for those doing domestic labour to go on strike?
- 4 In what ways do you think domestic labour might be (a) more satisfying and (b) less satisfying than work in paid employment?
- 5 Women who are full-time housewives suffer higher rates of stress, anxiety and depression, and poorer mental health, than women and men working in paid employment. With reference to figure 2.5, suggest reasons why this might be the case.
- 6 To what extent do you agree with the view that it is mainly men who benefit from domestic labour?
- 7 What kind of evidence would you use to judge whether there is 'symmetry' in your own family or relationship, or that of others? Identify the main issues you would want to look at.
- 8 Do you agree with the view that women are the main managers of family emotions? What evidence from your own or other families can you think of which shows this is or is not the case?

Questions

Who benefits from domestic labour?

For *radical feminists*, men are seen as the main people who benefit from domestic labour, as it is overwhelmingly women who do it. From this point of view, the inequalities in domestic labour are part of the problem of patriarchy, with the family seen as a patriarchal unit, institutionalizing, reinforcing and reproducing male power.

Marxist feminists see domestic labour as benefiting capitalism by contributing to the reproduction of labour power. Unpaid domestic labour reproduces the labour force at no cost to the capitalist, through the free production and rearing of children, and support for male workers. From this point of view, the family is a ‘social factory’, producing human labour power. Domestic labour also contributes to the daily reproduction of the labour force by providing for the physical and mental well-being of family members so they are capable of performing labour each day for the capitalist. However, Marxist feminists recognize it is also a problem of patriarchy, as it is women who do most of this unpaid work, and it is predominantly men who benefit from it.

The emotional side of family life

There is evidence that women take the major responsibility for ‘managing’ the emotional side of family life. This refers to things like the emotional aspects of childcare, such as talking to, listening to, understanding and supporting children, including older children. It also involves liaising between family members when there are rows, and acting as the family mediator. This additional work of women is very much in keeping with the view that the functionalist Parsons was talking about in the 1950s, when he wrote about the ‘expressive’ role of women. However, this ‘expressive’ role of women in the emotional side of family life is now often on top of their ‘instrumental’ responsibilities in paid employment and domestic labour. This means many female partners now often have three jobs (paid work, domestic labour and emotional work) to their male partner’s one. That women mainly undertake this aspect of family life is perhaps illustrated by the fact that, on separation or divorce, 40 per cent of fathers have lost contact with their children within two years.

Family change 4: the changing position of children in the family

The changing status of children

We tend to think of childhood as a clear and separate period of life, with the child’s world being different to, and separate from, the world of adults. However, sociologists would argue that childhood is a **social construction**. This means that the identity and status of children, and childhood as a separate phase of life, have been created by society and social attitudes, and are not simply moulded by biological immaturity.

The notion of childhood as a distinctive phase of life between infancy and adulthood is a relatively modern development. Philippe Aries (1973) showed that, in medieval times, childhood did not exist as a separate status. Children often moved straight from infancy, when they required constant care, to working roles in the community. Children were seen as ‘little adults’. They did not lead separate lives, and mixed with adults. None of the things we associate with childhood today, like toys, games, books, music, special clothes, schooling and so on, existed.

Aries showed the social construction of childhood was linked to industrialization. With industrialization, work moved outside the family home. Restrictions on child labour in mines and factories during the nineteenth century isolated most children from the ‘real world’ of adult work and responsibilities. The growing speed of technological change meant parents were frequently unable to pass on the knowledge and skills required for working life, and the requirements for a literate and numerate labour force in part led to the development of compulsory education from 1880. These changes made children dependent on parents or other adults. There then emerged a new conception of a phase of ‘childhood’, with children lacking in power and dependent on and supported by adults. This period of dependency is ever-lengthening today, as more young people spend time in education and training.

Children and the family in the nineteenth century

In the nineteenth century, the father and husband was the head of the family – it was a patriarchal unit – and the father often had a great deal of authority over other family members. He would often have little involvement in the care of his children. Children might see relatively little of their parents, and generally, children had low status in the family, and were expected ‘to be seen and not heard’.

Children and the family in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries

During the course of the twentieth century and in the early twenty-first, families have become more child-centred, with family activities and outings often focused on the interests of the children. The amount of time parents spend with their children has more than doubled since the 1960s, and parents are more likely to take an interest in their children’s activities, discussing decisions with them, and treating them more as equals. Often, the children’s welfare is seen as the major family priority, frequently involving the parents in considerable financial cost and sacrifice.

The causes of child-centredness

- Families have got smaller since the end of the nineteenth century, and this means more individual care and attention can be devoted to each child.
- In the nineteenth century, the typical working week was between 70 and 80 hours for many working-class people. Today it is more like 44 hours (including

overtime), and is tending to get shorter. This means parents have more time to spend with their children.

- Increasing affluence, with higher wages and a higher standard of living, has benefited children, as more money can be spent on them and their activities.
- The welfare state provides a wide range of benefits designed to help parents care for their children, and has increased demands on parents to look after their children properly. Social workers, for example, have an extensive range of powers to intervene in families on behalf of children, and have the ultimate power to remove children from families if parents fail to look after them properly. The Children Act of 1989 established children's legal rights.
- Paediatrics, or the science of childhood, has developed since the start of the twentieth century, with a wide range of research and popular books suggesting how parents should bring up their children to encourage their full development. The nurturing, protection and education of children are now seen as a vital and central part of family life, with 'parenting skills' and early-years education now recognized as an important aspect of children's educational and social development.
- Compulsory education and more time spent in further education and training have meant young people are dependent on their parents for longer periods of time. Tuition fees for higher education and the abolition of student grants have recently extended this period of dependency of young people on their parents. In this respect, 'childhood', and the dependency on adults it involves, has itself become extended.
- Children's lives have become more complex, with more educational, medical and leisure services for them. This frequently involves parents in ferrying children to schools, cinemas, friends and so on.
- Growing traffic dangers and parental fears (largely unjustified) of assaults on their children have meant that children now travel more with parents rather than being left to roam about on their own as much as they used to.
- Large businesses have encouraged a specific childhood consumer market. Businesses like Mothercare, Toys R Us, Nike, publishers and the music industry aim at the childhood consumer market, encouraging children to consume and parents to spend to satisfy their children's demands. 'Pester power', where advertisers target children to pester their parents into buying them CDs, clothes, toys and so on, is now an important feature of the advertising business.

Despite this growth of child-centredness, we need to be aware of the way that children are rapidly becoming exposed to a range of experiences that they share with adults, such as the mass media, especially television and videos. This may be eroding the cultural divisions between childhood and adult status.

On the other hand, the rapid pace of technological and social change often means that children are more up to date than their parents are. Computer technology and use of the Internet are good examples of this, as children are often far more adept at using these than their parents. The Internet particularly gives young people access to a range of knowledge and imagery of which their

parents in many cases have little awareness. This creates the possibility that young people will increasingly develop a culture that parents find goes beyond their comprehension or experience, and is far more in tune with the future than the culture of their parents. This may make parental involvement with their children's activities more difficult, and create a barrier between parents and children.

We must also remember that, although the status of children in the family has improved this century in Britain, child-centredness doesn't mean all children are well looked after. Abuse and neglect are all-too-common experiences for some children. This is discussed later in this chapter, in the section on the 'darker side' of family life.

Family change 5: the decline in average family size

Over the last century, the birth rate has been declining in Britain, from 28 per thousand in 1902 to about 11 per thousand in 2001.

The **birth rate** is the number of live births per thousand of the population each year.

This has meant that average family and household size has been dropping, from around 6 children per family in the 1870s to an average of around 1.8 children per family in 1998. The average household size in Britain has also almost halved in the last hundred years, from around 4.6 people to around 2.4 people per household in 1999. The trend towards smaller families, and more people living alone, explains this reduction in average household size.

The reasons for smaller families

Figure 2.6 summarizes the reasons for the decline in average family size.

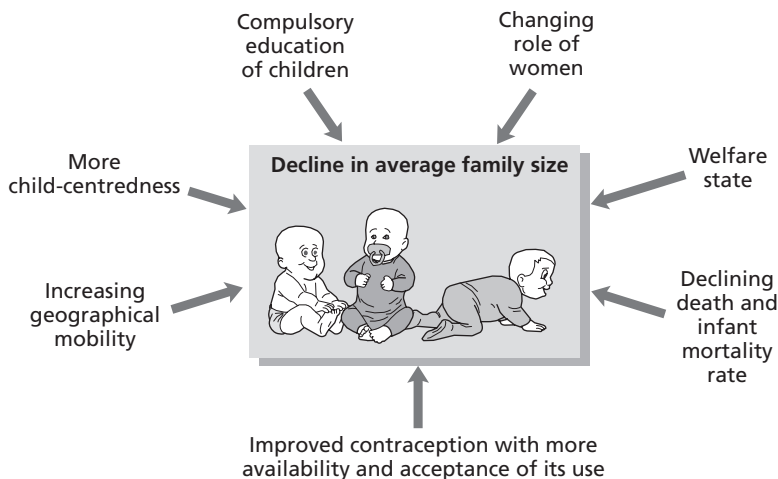


Figure 2.6 Reasons for the decline in the birth rate and smaller family size

Contraception

More effective and cheaper methods of contraception have been developed in the last century, and society's attitudes to the use of contraception have changed from disapproval to acceptance. This is partly because of growing secularization.

Secularization is the declining influence of the church and religion generally on people's behaviour.

The availability of safe and legal abortion since 1967 has also helped in terminating unwanted pregnancies. Family planning is therefore easier.

The compulsory education of children

Since children were barred from employment in the nineteenth century, and education became compulsory in 1880, they have ceased to be an economic asset that can contribute to family income through working at an early age. Children have therefore become an economic liability and a drain on the resources of parents, as they have to be supported for a long period in compulsory education, and often in post-16 education and training. Parents have therefore begun to limit the size of their families, to secure for themselves and their children a higher standard of living. The move to a more child-centred society has assisted in this restriction of family size, as smaller families mean parents can spend more money and time on and with each child.

The changing position of women

The changing position of women, particularly in the last century, has involved more equal status with men and greater employment opportunities. Women today have less desire to spend long years of their lives bearing and rearing children, and many wish to pursue a career of their own. While most women do eventually have children, there is a growing proportion who are choosing not to do so. For example, 20 per cent of 35-year-old women in 1989 were childless, compared to 12 per cent in 1979. This trend towards childlessness can be expected to continue, with women's growing position in paid employment. Nearly 25 per cent of women born in 1973 are expected to be still childless at age 45.

The declining infant mortality rate

In the nineteenth century, the absence of a welfare state meant many parents relied on their children to care for them in old age. However, many babies failed to survive infancy, and it was often uncertain whether children would outlive their parents. Parents therefore often had many children as a safeguard against some of them dying. The decline in the infant mortality rate and the death rate

(the number of deaths per 1000 of the population per year) has meant fewer children are dying before adulthood and old age, so parents no longer have many children as security against only a few surviving.

The **infant mortality rate** is the number of deaths of babies in the first year of life per 1000 live births per year.

The **death rate** is the number of deaths per 1000 of the population per year.

In addition, the range of agencies which exist to help the elderly today mean people are less reliant on care from their children when they reach old age.

A geographically mobile labour force

Industrial societies generally require a geographically mobile workforce, which means a workforce that can easily move to other areas for work or promotion. This may have been a factor in encouraging smaller families, as they can more easily pack up and move elsewhere.

Family change 6: the rising divorce rate

One of the most startling changes in the family in Britain in the last century has been the general and dramatic increase in the number of marriages to end in divorce, and a similar trend is found in many Western industrialized countries. The number of divorces rose from 27,000 in 1961 to around 171,000 by 1999, and during the 1970s the number doubled. Britain has one of the highest divorce rates in the European Union.

The **divorce rate** is the number of divorces per 1000 married people per year.

About 40 per cent of new marriages today are likely to end in divorce, and, if present rates continue, more than 1 in 4 children will experience a parental divorce by the time they are 16.

Divorce and 'broken homes'

Divorce is the legal termination of a marriage, but this is not the only way that marriages and homes can be 'broken'. Homes and marriages may be broken in 'empty shell' marriages, where the marital relationship has broken down, but no divorce has taken place. Separation – through either choice or necessity (like working abroad or imprisonment) – may also cause a broken home, as may the death of a partner. So homes may be broken for reasons other than divorce, and divorce itself is often only the end result of a marriage which broke down long before.

Divorce statistics

Divorce statistics are presented in three main ways:

- *the total number of divorce petitions per year* (the number of people applying for a divorce but not necessarily actually getting divorced)
- *the total number of decrees absolute granted per year* (the actual number of divorces granted)
- *the divorce rate* (the number of divorces each year per thousand married people in the population)

Divorce statistics must be treated with considerable caution, and assessed against changing legal, financial and social circumstances, if misleading conclusions about the declining importance of marriage and the family are to be avoided. The increase may simply reflect easier and cheaper divorce procedures enabling the legal termination of already unhappy ‘empty shell’ marriages, rather than a real increase in marriage breakdowns. It could be that people who in previous years could only separate are now divorcing as legal and financial obstacles are removed.

Divorce statistics only show legally terminated marriages. They do not show:

- the number of people who are separated but not divorced
- the number of people who live in ‘empty shell marriages’ – many couples may want to split up but are deterred from doing so by their roles as parents
- how many ‘unstable’ or ‘unhappy’ marriages existed before divorce was made easier by changes in the law and changing social attitudes to divorce

These points could mean *either* that divorce figures underestimate the extent of family and marriage breakdowns *or* that rising divorce rates only reflect legal changes and do not represent a real increase in marital instability.

Reasons for the rising divorce rate

There are two broad groups of reasons for the increase in the divorce rate: changes in the law which have gradually made divorce easier and cheaper to get, and changes in society which have made divorce a more practical and socially acceptable way of terminating a broken marriage. Figure 2.7 summarizes these changes.

Changes in the law

Changes in the law over the last century have made divorce easier and cheaper to get, and have given men and women equal rights in divorce. This partly accounts for the steep rise in the divorce rate during the century, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. These changes in the law are listed below. However, changes in the law reflect changing social attitudes and norms, and there are a number of wider social explanations that must also be considered.

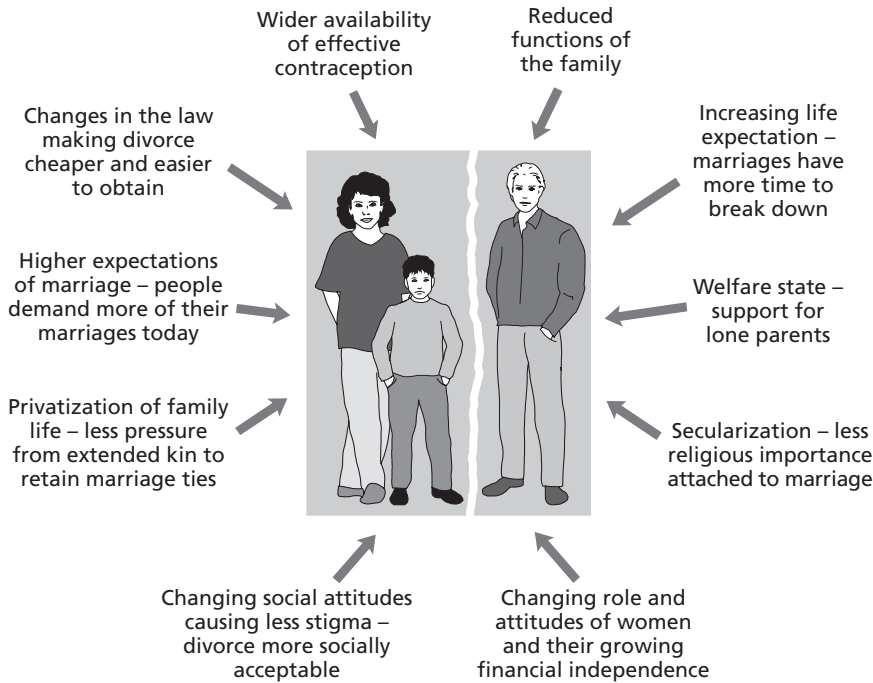


Figure 2.7 Causes of the rising divorce rate

A brief history of the divorce laws

Before 1857, divorce could only be obtained by the rich, since each divorce needed a private Act of Parliament. As a result, there were very few divorces. Since that time, changes in the law have made it easier to get a divorce, particularly during the twentieth century.

- *The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857* made divorce procedure easier and cheaper, but still beyond the financial means of the lower middle class and working class. Men had more rights in divorce than women, and divorce was only possible if it could be proved in court that a ‘matrimonial offence’ such as adultery, cruelty or desertion had been committed. Even by 1911, there were only about 600 divorces a year.
- *The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1923* gave women equal rights with men in divorce for the first time, and therefore gave more women the opportunity to terminate unhappy marriages.
- *The Legal Aid and Advice Act of 1949* gave financial assistance with the costs of solicitors’ and court fees, which made it far more possible for working-class people to cope with the costs of a divorce action.
- *The Divorce Law Reform Act of 1969*, which came into effect in 1971, was a major change. Before the 1969 Act, a person wanting a divorce had

to prove before a court that his or her spouse had committed a 'matrimonial offence', as mentioned above. This frequently led to major public scandals, as all the details of unhappy marriages were aired in a public law court. This may have deterred many people whose marriage had broken down from seeking a divorce. Also, marriages may have broken down – become 'empty shell' marriages – without any matrimonial offence being committed.

The 1969 Act changed all this, and made 'irretrievable breakdown' of a marriage the only grounds for divorce. It is now no longer necessary to prove one partner 'guilty' of a matrimonial offence, but simply to demonstrate that a marriage has broken down beyond repair. After 1971, one way of demonstrating 'irretrievable breakdown' of a marriage was by two years of separation. This change in the law led to a massive increase in the number of divorces after 1971.

- *The Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act of 1984* allowed couples to petition for divorce after only one year of marriage, whereas previously couples could normally divorce only after three years of marriage. This led to a record increase in the number of divorces in 1984 and 1985.
- *The Family Law Act of 1996* came into effect in 1999. This increased the amount of time before a divorce could be granted to eighteen months, introduced marriage counselling for a 'period of reflection', and required children's wishes and financial arrangements to be agreed before a divorce was granted. This was an attempt to stem the rising number of divorces by increasing the time for 'cooling off'. The Labour government in 2001 abandoned the compulsory counselling sessions as it was found that these were more likely to encourage people to go through with a divorce, even when they were initially uncertain.

Changes in society

The changing role of women

This is a very important explanation for the rising divorce rate. Around three-quarters of divorce petitions (requests to a court for a divorce) are initiated by women, and around three out of four of all divorces are granted to women. This suggests more women than men are unhappy with the state of their marriages, and are more likely to take the first steps in ending them. This may well be because women's expectations of life and marriage have risen during the course of the last century, and they are less willing to accept a traditional housewife/mother role, with the sacrifices of their own leisure activities, careers and independence this involves.

The employment of married women has increased over the last century. For example, in 1931, only 10 per cent of married women were employed, but this had gradually risen to about 75 per cent by the end of the twentieth century.

This has increased their financial independence, and reduced the extent of dependence on their husbands. There is also a range of welfare state benefits to help divorced women, particularly those with children. Marriage has therefore become less of a financial necessity for women, and this makes it easier for women to escape from unhappy marriages.

Rising expectations of marriage

Functionalist writers like Parsons and Fletcher argue that the divorce rate has risen because couples (especially women) expect and demand more in their relationships today than their parents or grandparents might have settled for. Love, companionship, understanding, sexual compatibility and personal fulfilment are more likely to be the main ingredients of a successful marriage today. The growing privatization and isolation of the nuclear family from extended kin and the community has also meant couples are more likely to spend more time together. Consequently couples are more likely to end a relationship which earlier generations might have tolerated.

This functionalist approach suggests that higher divorce rates therefore indicate better-quality marriages. This view of the higher expectations of marriage is reflected in the fairly high rate of remarriage among divorced people. In other words, families split up to reform happier families – a bit like ‘old banger’ cars failing their MOT test, being taken to the scrap yard and replaced with a better-quality car, and thereby improving the general quality of cars on the road.

Growing secularization

Secularization refers to the declining influence of religious beliefs and institutions. Writers such as Goode (1971) and C. Gibson (1994) argue this has resulted in marriage becoming less of a sacred, spiritual union and more a personal and practical commitment which can be abandoned if it fails. Evidence for this lies in the fact that more than 60 per cent of marriages today no longer involve a religious ceremony. The church now takes a much less rigid view of divorce, and many people today probably do not attach much religious significance to their marriages.

Changing social attitudes

Divorce has become more socially acceptable, and there is less social disapproval and condemnation (stigmatizing) of divorcees. Divorce no longer hinders careers through a public sense of scandal and outrage. As a result, people are less afraid of the consequences of divorce, and are more likely to seek a legal end to an unhappy marriage rather than simply separating or carrying on in an ‘empty shell’ marriage.

The greater availability of, and more effective, contraception

The greater availability of and more effective contraception has made it safer to have sex outside of the marital relationship, and with more than one person

during marriage. This weakens traditional constraints on ‘fidelity’ to a marriage partner, and potentially exposes relationships to greater instability.

The growth of the privatized nuclear family

Functionalists argue the growing privatization and isolation of the nuclear family from extended kin and the community in industrial society has meant it is no longer so easy for marriage partners to seek advice from or temporary refuge with relatives. This isolation can also increase the demands and expectations of each partner in a marriage. There is also less social control from extended kin pressuring couples to retain marriage ties. In this sense, there is both more pressure on marriage relationships arising from the points above, and fewer constraints preventing people abandoning marriage, and increasingly the decision whether to divorce or not lies with the married couple alone.

The reduced functions of the family

As we saw earlier in this chapter, some functionalist writers argue that, with industrialization, a number of family functions transferred to other social institutions. This has perhaps meant that marriage has become less of a necessity, and there are fewer bonds linking marriage partners. Love, companionship, understanding, sexual compatibility and personal fulfilment are more likely to be the main ingredients of a successful marriage today, and if some or all of these disappear, there may be nothing much left to hold the marriage together.

Increasing life expectation

People live to a greater age today than they did in the early years of the twentieth century, and this means the potential number of years a couple may be together, before the death of a partner occurs, has increased. This gives more time for marriages to ‘go wrong’ and for divorces to occur. It has been suggested that the divorce courts have taken on the role in finishing unhappy marriages that the undertaker once did!

Variations in divorce rates between social groups

While divorce affects all groups in the population, there are some where divorce rates are higher than the average. Teenage marriages are twice as likely to end in divorce as those of couples overall, and there is a high incidence of divorce in the first five to seven years of marriage and after about fourteen years (when the children are older or have left home). The working class, particularly semi- and unskilled, has a higher rate of divorce than the middle class. Childless couples and partners from different social class or religious backgrounds also face a higher risk of divorce, as do those whose work separates them for long periods. The rising divorce rate therefore does not affect all groups of married people equally, with some facing higher risks of divorce than others.

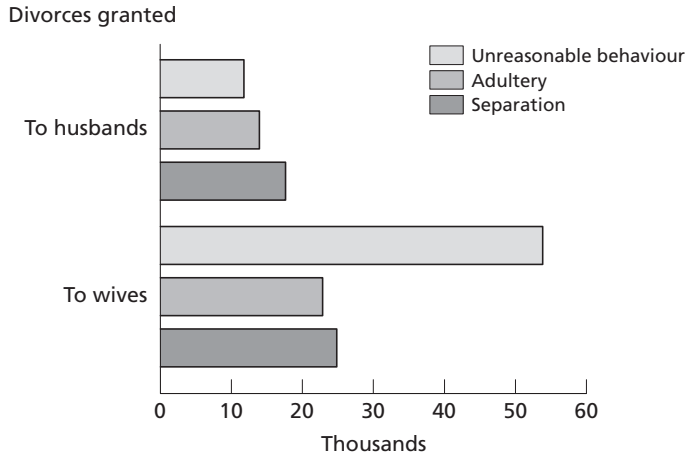


Figure 2.8 Facts proven at divorce and to whom granted: England and Wales, 1998
 Source: data adapted from Office for National Statistics

1 Suggest reasons why the following groups might be more 'at risk' of divorce than other groups in the population:

- teenage marriages
- childless couples
- couples where each partner is from a different social class or ethnic background

2 Suggest reasons why women are more likely to apply for divorce than men.

3 Refer to figure 2.8, which shows the different number and reasons for divorce by husbands and wives:

- (a) Which reason for divorce shows the largest difference between husbands and wives?
- (b) Approximately how many more divorces were granted to wives than husbands?
- (c) Outline the main differences in the reasons for divorce by husbands and wives, and suggest explanations for them. What conclusions might you draw about the different behaviour of men and women in marriage?

Questions

Family change 7: remarriage and the growth of the reconstituted family

While marriage is still the usual form of partnership between men and women, first-time marriages for both partners are declining substantially. The number of these has more than halved since 1970. Just over two-fifths of marriages now involve a remarriage for one or both partners, mainly reflecting the increase in the divorce rate. A lot more divorced men remarry than divorced women, reflecting women's greater dissatisfaction or disillusionment with marriage. This is perhaps not surprising, given the way women often have to balance the triple

and competing demands of paid employment, domestic labour and childcare, and emotional ‘management’ of the family.

These trends have meant that there are more reconstituted families (sometimes called ‘step-families’) with step-parents, step-children and step-brothers and step-sisters arising from a previous relationship of one or both partners. In 1999, most of these reconstituted families – around 87 per cent – consisted of a couple with at least one child from a previous relationship of the woman. This reflects the fact that it is nearly always women who gain custody of children in the event of a relationship breakdown. Official estimates suggest there are around half a million step-families with dependent step-children in Britain, and around one million dependent children (both step-children and natural children) live in such families.

Family change 8: the growth of the lone-parent family

One of the biggest changes in the family has been the growth of the lone-parent family (also known as the single-parent or one-parent family). The percentage of lone-parent families has tripled since 1971, and Britain has one of the highest proportions of lone-parent families in Europe. About 25 per cent of all families with dependent children were lone-parent families in 2000 – nine out of ten of them headed by women. Nearly 1 in 4 (23 per cent) of dependent children now live in such families, compared to just 7 per cent in 1972.

Why are there more lone-parent families?

The rapid growth in the number of lone-parent families can be explained by a number of factors, some of which have already been discussed earlier in explaining the rising divorce rate.

Activity

Explain how each of the following factors might explain the growth in the number of lone parents. Refer back to the section on divorce earlier in this chapter if you’re not sure:

- the greater economic independence of women
 - improved contraception, changing male attitudes and fewer ‘shotgun weddings’
 - changing social attitudes
-

The ‘New Right’ particularly blames the generosity of the welfare state for the growth in lone parenthood. Writers such as Charles Murray argue generous welfare benefits encourage women to have children they could not otherwise afford to support. This is often linked to the idea of the underclass, which is discussed in chapter 6.

The growth in lone parenthood has been seen by some as one of the major signs of the 'decline' of conventional family life and marriage. Lone-parent families – and particularly lone never-married mothers – have been portrayed by some of the media and conservative politicians of the 'New Right' as promiscuous parasites, blamed for everything from rising juvenile crime through to housing shortages, rising drug abuse, educational failure of children and the general breakdown of society. The problems created by lone parenthood, particularly for boys, are usually explained by the lack of a male role model in the home, and consequently inadequate socialization.

Lone parenthood has therefore been presented as a major social problem, and there have been moral panics about lone parenthood in the mass media. A moral panic is a wave of public concern about some exaggerated or imaginary threat to society, stirred up by exaggerated and sensationalized reporting in the mass media.

In an effort to cut the welfare costs to the state of lone parents, the Child Support Agency was established in 1993. This was designed to encourage absent fathers to take financial responsibility for their children, thereby reducing benefit costs to the state. There have been a number of attempts to encourage lone parents to support themselves through paid employment. For example, since 1997, a new Childcare Tax Credit to help with the costs of childcare has been introduced, along with a national childcare strategy to ensure good-quality, affordable childcare, the expansion of nursery places for 3- and 4-year-olds, and more pre- and after-school clubs. These policies arise from the fact that it is the lack of affordable childcare that is the major deterrent to lone parents working. The national minimum wage helps to avoid the exploitation of lone parents, who are mainly women, by unscrupulous employers, and the New Deal for Lone Parents enabled many lone parents to find paid employment.

Nailing the myths

The never-married lone mother only accounts for around 40 per cent of all lone parents, with most lone-parent families arising from divorce, separation or widowhood, as figure 2.9 shows. Even among the never-married lone mothers, the vast majority cohabited with the father and have registered his name on the birth certificate.

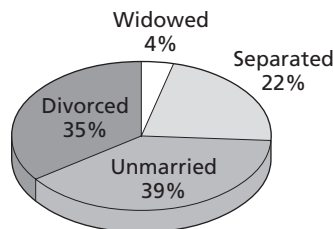


Figure 2.9 Lone-mother families with dependent children, by marital status: Great Britain, 2000

Source: data from Labour Force Survey

The problems allegedly created by absent fathers has been challenged on the grounds that it is not the presence or absence of a father that is important, but whether fathers actually involve themselves in the children's upbringing. There are probably many fathers in two-parent families as well who fail to involve themselves in the care and discipline of their children, and problems like juvenile delinquency are likely to arise in any household where children are inadequately supervised and disciplined. This problem, often blamed on lone parenthood, is therefore just as likely to occur among two-parent families. A Home Office report in 1985 found no difference in the crime rates between youngsters from lone- and two-parent families. Even if there were such a link, it is likely to be caused by poverty rather than lone parenthood – as lack of childcare facilities means many lone parents have to depend on inadequate state benefits to live, and lone parents are more likely to live in overcrowded or poor-quality housing. This probably explains other factors linked in the popular imagination to lone parenthood, such as lower educational achievement.

A misleading myth is that of lone teenage mothers getting pregnant to jump the queue for social (council and housing association) housing. There is very little evidence for this. A 1999 report from the National Council for One Parent Families pointed out the average age for a lone parent is 34, and that at any one time, less than 3 per cent of all lone parents are teenagers. Research in 1996 by the Economic and Social Research Council found that only 10 per cent of the small minority of women who became mothers prior to any partnership with the father were living alone with their child in social (council) housing six months after the birth. Many live with their parents, and many single, never-married parents have been in cohabiting relationships which break down. In effect, this is no different from marriages that break down.

Activity

- 1 Suggest reasons why, in the event of divorce, women are more likely than men to be given custody of the children.
 - 2 Suggest explanations why most lone-parent families are headed by women.
 - 3 To what extent do you agree with the following statements, and why?
 - 'A lone mother can bring up her child as well as a married couple.'
 - 'People who want children ought to get married.'
 - 'To grow up happily, children need a home with both their mother and father.'
 - 4 What are the advantages and disadvantages of lone parenthood compared to two-parent families?
 - 5 Suggest reasons why the stereotypes held by professionals (like teachers, police officers and social workers) might mean children from lone-parent families are more likely (a) to underachieve in education and (b) to be over-represented in the official crime statistics.
-

Family change 9: the decline in marriage and the growing incidence and acceptance of cohabitation

The decline of marriage and the growth of living together before or outside of marriage were two of the major social changes occurring in the second half of the last century, and they continue today. Marriage rates are declining in Britain, and there are more and more couples cohabiting rather than seeking official recognition of their relationships through marriage. In 1997, there were 310,000 marriages in the United Kingdom – around the lowest number in the twentieth century. Around a quarter of non-married males and females were cohabiting in 1999. A number of cohabiting couples included people who were separated, but not divorced. By the 1990s, the majority of people in first marriages had lived with their partner beforehand. Research by the Office for National Statistics found the people in six in every ten couples married in 1994 gave the same address as each other. This provides strong evidence that these couples were cohabiting before marriage (and this ‘living in sin’ included 41 per cent of those getting married in a religious ceremony). There are well over a million and a half cohabiting couples who have refused to tie the marriage knot – more than one in ten of all couples. Many cohabiting relationships eventually end up in marriage – about 60 per cent of first-time cohabitations turn into marriages.

The reasons for the decline of marriage and growing cohabitation have been considered earlier, including:

- the changing role of women, whose growing economic independence has given them more freedom to choose their relationships.
- the growing divorce rate, and the message that is sending out to potential marriage partners.
- growing secularization.
- changing social attitudes and reduced social stigma. Young people are more likely to cohabit than older people, and this may in part reflect the evidence that older people are more likely than younger people to think that ‘living together outside marriage is always wrong’. This reveals more easy-going attitudes to cohabitation among the young, showing the reduced social stigma attached to cohabitation.
- the greater availability of, and more effective, contraception.
- higher expectations of marriage.

Family change 10: the growth in ‘singlehood’ – living alone

About one in three households today contains only one person, compared to one in twenty in 1901. Around half of these households are over pension age (age 60 women, 65 for men), compared to two-thirds in 1971. This means there is a growth in the number of younger people living alone. This trend can be explained by the decline in marriage, the rise in divorce and separation, and the

fact that people are delaying marriage or cohabitation until they are older. Longer lives, particularly for women, who generally live longer than men, explain the increase in the number of pensioner one-person households.

Family change 11: more births outside marriage

Around four in every ten births is now outside of marriage – about four times more than the proportion in 1977. Despite the record numbers of children being born outside of marriage, about 80 per cent of those births in 1998 were registered jointly by the parents. Both parents in three out of four of these cases gave the same address. This suggests the parents were cohabiting, and that children are still being born into a stable couple relationship, even if the partners are not legally married. The explanations for the increase of births outside of marriage are very similar to those for the increase in the divorce rate, the decline in the marriage rate and the increase in cohabitation, which were discussed above.

Family diversity and the myth of the ‘cereal packet’ family

The popular impression that many people have of the family in Britain at the turn of the twenty-first century has been described as the ‘cereal packet family’. This is the **stereotype** often promoted in advertising and other parts of the mass media, with ‘family-size’ breakfast cereals, toothpaste, and a wide range of other consumer goods. This popular ‘happy family’ image often gives the impression that most people live in a ‘typical family’ with the following features:

- It is a privatized, nuclear family unit consisting of two parents living with one or two of the natural dependent children of both partners.
- These parents are married to one another, and neither of them has been married before.
- The husband is the ‘breadwinner’, with the wife staying at home and primarily concerned with housework and childcare, or perhaps working a bit to supplement the family income.

It is this ‘cereal packet’ stereotype of the ‘typical family’ which is found in family ideology.

Family ideology is that dominant set of beliefs, values and images about how families are and how they *ought* to be.

This is discussed below. This stereotype of the ‘typical family’ is very mistaken, as there is a wide range of households and family types in contemporary Britain. This is known as family diversity.



The 'cereal packet' family, with a working father in a first marriage to a home-based mother, caring for their own two natural children, makes up only about 5 per cent of all households.

Why is the 'cereal packet' stereotype misleading?

The 'cereal packet' stereotyped 'conventional' or 'typical' family is very misleading because, as discussed earlier in this chapter, there have been and continue to be important changes in family patterns, and there is a wide range of family types and household arrangements in modern Britain. This growing diversity of relationships that people live in shows that traditional family life is being eroded, as people are constantly developing new forms of relationship, and choosing to live in different ways. The meaning of 'family' and 'family life' is therefore changing for a substantial number of parents and children.

Households and families

Figure 2.10 shows the different types of household in Britain in 2000, and what percentages of people were living in them. In 2000, only 23 per cent of households contained a married or cohabiting couple with dependent children, and only 39 per cent of people lived in such a household. Twenty-nine per cent of households consisted of one person living alone, and 64 per cent of households had no dependent children in them. Ten per cent of people lived in lone-parent families, and 9 per cent of households were lone-parent families. This alone

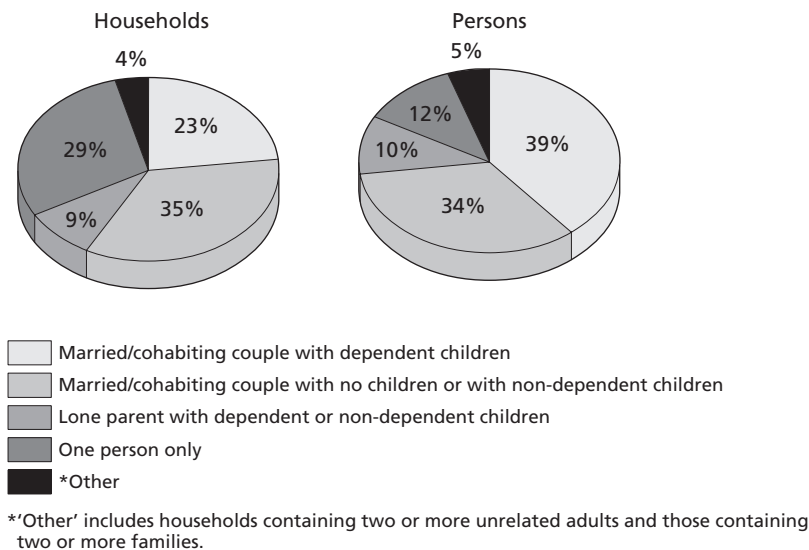


Figure 2.10 Households and people, by type of household: Great Britain, 2000
Source: data from Labour Force Survey

shows that the ‘cereal packet’ image of the nuclear family does not represent the arrangement in which most people in Britain live.

Families with dependent children

Figure 2.11 examines families with dependent children. This shows that in 2000, about 25 per cent of such families were lone-parent families, with nine out of ten of them headed by women. Although a married or cohabiting couple headed

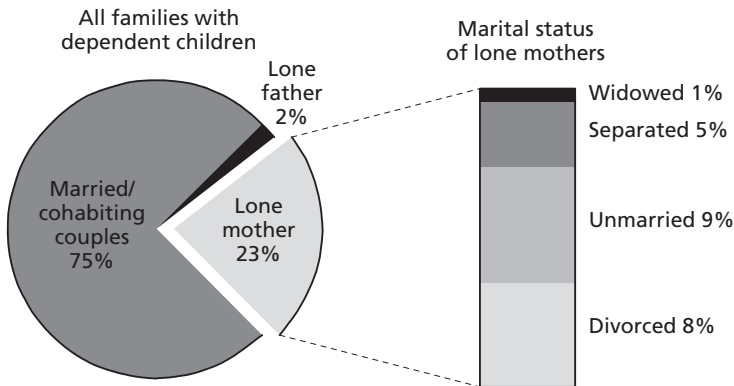


Figure 2.11 Families with dependent children, by family type and, for lone mothers, by marital status: Great Britain, 2000
Source: data from Labour Force Survey

75 per cent of families with dependent children, this doesn't mean that most of these families conformed to the 'cereal packet' image:

- A number of these families were reconstituted families, in which one or both partners were previously married. More than two in five marriages currently taking place will end in divorce, and more than 40 per cent of all marriages now involve remarriage for one or both partners. Consequently, around 10 per cent of children under 16 live in a reconstituted family.
- Most of these families were dual-worker families, where both parents were working. In 2000, about 60 per cent of couples with dependent children were both working. As figure 2.4 (on p. 55) showed, large numbers of mothers with dependent children work in paid employment, with the numbers increasing as children get older. In 2000, about 70 per cent of all women with dependent children were working.

The 'cereal packet' 'happy family' stereotype of family ideology, of a working father married to a home-based mother caring for two small children, in 2000 made up only about 5 per cent of all households.

Refer to figures 2.10 and 2.11:

- 1 What percentage of households in 2000 consisted of one person only?
- 2 What percentage of people in 2000 were living in households consisting of a married or cohabiting couple with no children or with non-dependent children?
- 3 In 2000, what percentage of all families with dependent children were headed by a lone mother who was widowed?
- 4 What was the main cause of lone motherhood?
- 5 Suggest reasons why so many people seem to believe that the 'cereal packet' family is the most common type of family.

Questions

Other forms of family and household diversity

Other forms of family diversity include:

- *cultural diversity*. This refers to differences in family lifestyles between ethnic and religious groups.
 - *South Asian families*. Ballard found extended family relationships are more common in minority ethnic groups originating in South Asia, from Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. Such families are commonly patriarchal in structure, with seniority going to the eldest male, and to males in general. A December 2000 report from the Institute for Social and Economic Research, *Family Formation in Multicultural Britain*, found the highest rates of marriage were among Pakistani and Bangladeshi women (three-quarters were married by age 25, compared to half of white women), and virtually all South Asians with a partner were in a formal marriage. A majority of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women reported their

primary activity to be looking after the house and family. In many ways, the traditional British ‘cereal packet’ family of a working male married to a home-based female is more likely to be found among Pakistanis and Bangladeshis than any other ethnic group. Divorce rates are low in such families because of strong social disapproval, and a wide support network of kin for families under stress. Arranged marriages are still common in such communities.

- *West Indian (African-Caribbean) families* are often centred on the mother, who is in many cases the main breadwinner. Lone parenthood is higher among African-Caribbean mothers than any other ethnic group – over half of African-Caribbean families with children are lone parents, and there are low marriage rates. This partly reflects a cultural tradition, but also high rates of black male unemployment and men’s inability and reluctance to support families. African-Caribbean families often centre on a female network of friends and kin to support women with children.
- *class diversity*. This refers to differences between middle- and working-class families. For example, extended families are still found in traditional working-class communities, and the nuclear family may be more common in middle-class families. Differences in income will also lead to differences in lifestyle between such families.
- *life cycle diversity*. This refers to the way families may change through life; for example, as partners have children, as the children grow older, and as they eventually leave the home. All these factors mean the family will be constantly changing. For instance, levels of family income will change as children move from dependence to independence, levels of domestic labour and childcare will differ, and levels of participation in paid employment will alter, particularly for women, due to the absence or presence of children and to the children’s age.
- *regional diversity*. This refers to the way family life differs in different geographical locations around the country. Eversley and Bonnerjea suggest there are distinctive patterns of family life in different areas of Britain. For example, on the south coast there is a high proportion of elderly couples, older industrial areas and very traditional rural communities tend to have more extended families, and the inner cities have a higher proportion of families in poverty and lone-parent families.

Figure 2.12 summarizes some aspects of family diversity.

Questions

- 1 Identify all the ways that family life might change during its life cycle.
- 2 Suggest differences you might expect to find between working-class and middle-class families.
- 3 Write an essay of about one and a half sides of A4 paper answering the following question:

Discuss the view that there is no ‘typical’ family or household in Britain today.

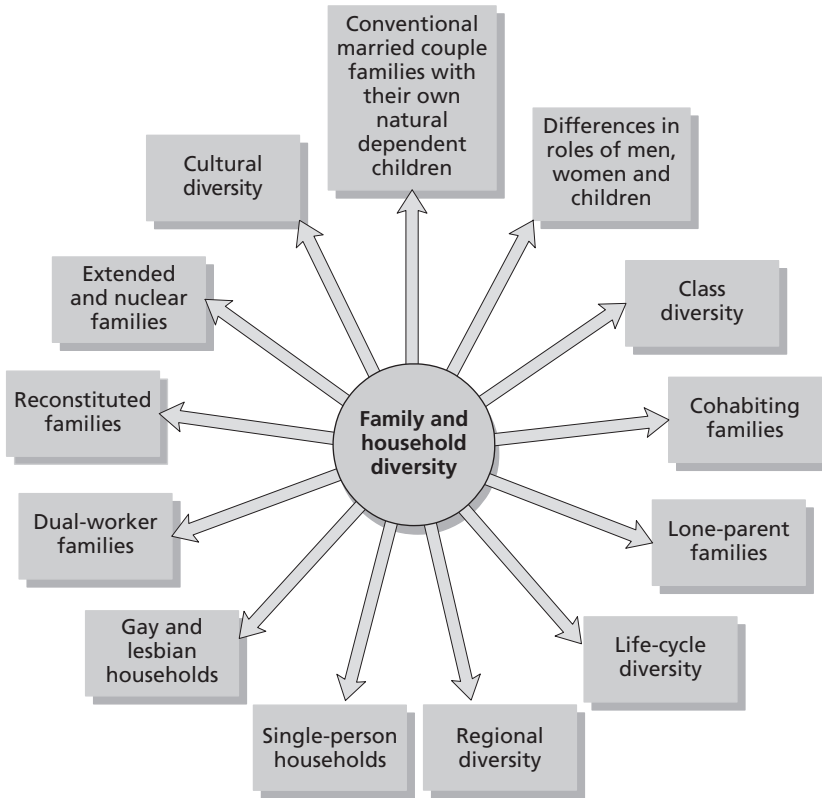


Figure 2.12 Family and household diversity

The ‘darker side’ of family life

The ‘cereal packet’ image of the ‘typical family’ has already been questioned on a number of levels, but the view often put forward by functionalists of the warm and supportive ‘happy family’ has been questioned on a more fundamental level by many writers, particularly feminists.

While the family may often be a warm and supportive unit for its members, it can also be a hostile and dangerous place. The growing privatization of family life can lead to emotional stress in the family. Family members are thrown together, isolated from and lacking the support of extended kin, neighbours and the wider community. Tempers become easily frayed, emotional temperatures and stress levels rise, and – as in a pressure cooker without a safety valve – explosions occur, and family conflict is the result. This may lead to violence, divorce, and psychological damage to children, perhaps even mental illness and crime.

The breakdown of marriages which leads to divorce is often the end result of long-running and bitter disputes between partners. The intense emotions involved in family life often mean that incidents that would appear trivial in other situations take on the proportion of major confrontations inside the family. The

extent of violence in the family is coming increasingly to public attention, with rising reports of sexual and physical abuse, and emotional neglect, of children, the rape of wives by their husbands, and wife- and baby-battering. One in four murders take place in the family. This is the darker side of family life.

Because of the private nature of the family, accurate evidence on the extent of violence and abuse inside the family is difficult to obtain, and fear or shame means that it is almost certain that most of such incidents are covered up.

The abuse of children

There are several different types of abuse of children, as figure 2.13 shows. *Sexual abuse* refers to adults using their power to perform sex acts with children below the age of consent (16 for heterosexual and lesbian acts and 18 for male homosexual acts). *Physical abuse* refers to non-sexual violence. *Emotional abuse* refers to persistent or severe emotional ill-treatment or rejection of children, which has severe effects on their emotional development and behaviour. *Neglect* refers to the failure to protect children from exposure to danger, including cold and starvation, and failing to care for them properly so that their health or development is affected.

In 2000, Department of Health statistics showed there were 30,300 children and young people under the age of 18 on child protection registers in England for various forms of abuse. There were 9700 children registered for physical injury or sexual abuse alone, 11,100 for neglect, and a further 5500 for emotional abuse alone. A 2000 report from the NSPCC (the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children), *Child Maltreatment in the United Kingdom*, found around 10 per cent of children suffered serious abuse or neglect at home, with most committed by natural parents.

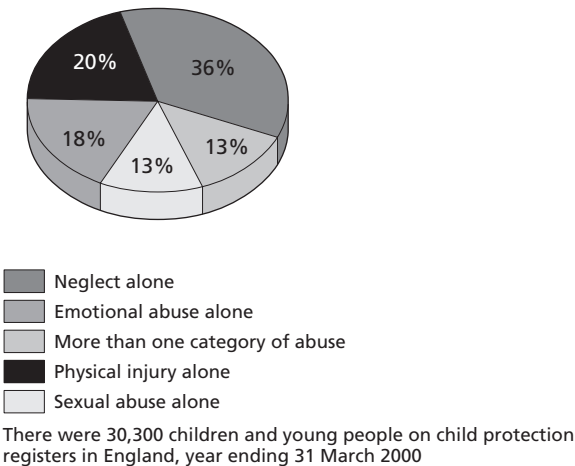


Figure 2.13 Children and young people on child protection registers, by category of abuse: England, year ending 31 March 2000
Source: Department of Health

This was just for England, and only for abuse which was brought to the attention of social services departments. It is very likely that much abuse goes on that is undiscovered. Some indication of this is given by statistics from Childline, the free confidential counselling service for children, established in 1986. In the ten years to 1996, out of the 152,000 children helped, 41,000 (27 per cent) called about sexual and physical abuse.

Violence against women

There is widespread evidence of violence by men against their female partners – battered wives. Such violence is often not taken very seriously by the police or courts, being dismissed as a ‘domestic dispute’ – which seems to suggest violence against women is seen in some quarters as an acceptable and normal part of a relationship. Certainly the type of physical violence battered women are subject to by their male partners would quite probably result in prosecution and imprisonment if it was carried out against a stranger outside the family. The largest survey ever conducted on domestic violence in Britain, in 1993, found that one in ten women had been victims of violence from their partners in the past twelve months, with 28 per cent of women suffering physical injury. Only 22 per cent of the attacks were reported to the police. A 1996 survey in Surrey discovered an even worse picture, with 31 per cent of women (nearly one in three) having experienced violence from a known man, 24 per cent having been beaten up, 16 per cent living in constant fear of domestic violence, and 13 per cent feeling suicidal or suffering depression. Two-thirds of victims of domestic violence had not sought help because they were afraid, ashamed, or saw it as a private matter.

Statistics such as these, and the widespread growth of refuges for battered women since the 1970s, reflect the extent and seriousness of the problem of violence against women in the home, much of which goes unreported and undiscovered. Some argue that there is also violence by women against men in the family. However, the analysis of police and court records suggests that 99 per cent of assaults between partners involve men assaulting women. Despite the high level of violence against women in married and cohabiting relationships, many women do not leave their violent partners. This is often because of fear, shame and embarrassment, financial insecurity, lack of alternative housing and concerns about disruption to their children’s lives.

Rape is when someone is forced to have sex against his or her will, often accompanied by the actual or threatened use of violence. Research suggests that over one in four of women are raped, with most rapes being committed by husbands on their wives. It was only as recently as 1991 that rape within marriage was made a criminal offence.

Explanations for domestic violence

Radical feminists explain domestic violence as a result of patriarchy. In a society where men dominate women, violence is often used by men, frequently when

they are drunk, to control and intimidate women, and to keep them in a state of submission. Marxist feminists are likely to emphasize structural factors as well. These include social deprivation (which may, for example, generate stress and disputes about money), a culture of violence – particularly in some parts of the working class – and the generally lower status of women in society. Both radical feminists and Marxist feminists would agree that domestic violence stems from structural inequalities in society, and that only by improving the position of women in society generally, and making housing and employment policies and the legal system more responsive to domestic violence and the needs of women, will domestic violence be tackled at its roots.

Activity

- 1 Why do you think child abuse and domestic violence statistics are likely to understate the extent of these social problems?
 - 2 How would you define child abuse? Do you think ideas about what child abuse is have changed over time? Give reasons for your answer.
 - 3 What difficulties do you think sociologists might face in trying to research the areas of child abuse and domestic violence against women?
 - 4 What explanations might there be for child abuse?
-

Family ideology

Family ideology refers to a dominant set of ideas, beliefs and images about family life, family structure and family relationships which suggest what the ideal family is and how family life ought to be lived. At the heart of this ideology is the patriarchal ‘cereal packet’ family model discussed earlier. This family is seen as the ‘normal’ family, and a symbol of natural, wholesome goodness, and supporting such a traditional family and parental responsibilities is often seen as crucial to maintaining moral values in society. Family ideology represents a powerful view of how people should lead their lives, even if this ideology does not reflect the reality of how most people do actually live their lives.

As seen earlier, this ‘cereal packet’ image no longer corresponds to the typical household unit, and does not reflect the reality of everyday experience for the majority of families or people. Writers such as Barrett and McIntosh (1982) have argued this stereotype found in family ideology is patriarchal, harmful and anti-social:

- *It is patriarchal* because it involves the exploitation of women through the triple burden of domestic and emotional labour in the family, on top of paid employment. This benefits men to the disadvantage of women. Women remain disadvantaged in paid work compared to men because of their assumed or

actual responsibilities for housework, childcare, and looking after other dependants, like disabled or elderly relatives. This increases women's dependency on men in relationships.

- *It is harmful* as it suggests that those living in other relationships, or living alone, are somehow deviant, a threat to 'normal' family life and lacking any meaningful relationships in their lives. Every time politicians or policy makers make appeals to 'strengthen the family', they are at the same time condemning those who live outside such a family, such as lone parents, lesbian and gay couples, and those living alone. Lone parents, particularly, are regularly subject to attack by conservative politicians and the mass media because they are seen as 'inadequate' units for bringing up children, and the source of a range of social problems. Attacks on gays are often justified by the threat they are perceived to present to 'normal' heterosexual relationships found in family ideology. Yet those living outside conventional families now make up a substantial proportion of the population. It is also harmful because it pretends that there is no 'darker side' of family life, as discussed above, and prevents such issues being treated as seriously as they should be, at great cost to the women and children who are victimized in the family. The stereotyped image of family ideology overlooks the ways women become isolated at home with children or struggle to combine paid work with childcare, which are very stressful and lead many women towards tranquillizer use and mental illness. Lone-parent and other non-conformist household units may face discrimination by social workers, teachers, the police and magistrates and therefore face higher risks of labelling or stereotyping and failure at school, and of being taken into care or arrested and prosecuted, because they are seen as 'deviant'.
- *It is anti-social* because it devalues life outside of the family. Much of social life today centres on family activities, and it is often difficult for those outside such conventional arrangements to participate. For example, schools are organized in such a way that it is difficult for lone-parent families and dual-worker families to combine work with childcare. Package holidays are overwhelmingly geared to families, and those who are lone parents or who live alone may often find it difficult to get the same financial deals as family groups. Family ideology separates people from one another – from 'us' in the family and 'them' outside the family, and therefore sets up barriers between people. It devalues life outside the family, and discourages alternative forms of domestic organization and relationships between people from developing, such as same-sex relationships, lone parenthood, communal living or serial monogamy.

Politics, social policy and the family

Debates over family life have become a major feature of politics in Britain. The family ideology and 'family values' discussed above have had important consequences for government social policies on the family. Both Labour and

Conservative politicians have expressed similar views on the importance of the family, and both seek to strengthen the traditional family. Both parties tend to support family ideology's 'cereal packet' view of the traditional family, to see it as one of society's central and most important institutions, and to encourage support for living in traditional family units. They see the family as being 'under threat' from increasing divorce rates, rising numbers of lone parents and births outside marriage, with the growing diversity of alternative lifestyles undermining the stability of society and generating serious moral decline. Wider social problems like teenage pregnancies, sexual promiscuity, educational failure, welfare dependency, poverty, drug abuse and crime and delinquency have all at one time or another been blamed on the failure of the family. The blame generally falls on the inadequate socialization and supervision of children by parents, and in some cases the lack of a male role model for boys. The similarity of Labour and Conservative approaches was made very clear in the 1997 general election manifestos. The Conservative party manifesto stated 'The family is the most important institution in our lives. It offers security in a fast-changing world . . . Conservatives believe that a healthy society encourages people to accept responsibility for their own lives . . . we want families to help themselves.' The Labour party manifesto made very similar points: 'We will uphold family life as the most secure means of bringing up our children. Families are the core of our society. They should teach right from wrong. They should be the first defence against anti-social behaviour. The breakdown of family life damages the fabric of our society.' The solutions, though, have been different.

Conservative or 'New Right' solutions

Conservative social policies have been influenced by what has become known as the 'New Right'. The New Right approach places ever-greater burdens of care and welfare on families, with limited provision of support and resources from the state. The New Right has opposed a number of measures which they argue undermine the 'traditional' family and morality. They take an approach which essentially forces people into dependence on the family rather than the welfare state. For example, they have opposed some welfare state benefits which they see as encouraging 'deviant' lifestyles and family forms, such as benefits to lone parents; they have opposed easier divorce laws, easier abortion laws, and a loosening of laws against homosexuality. They believe, to encourage people to live in traditional family units, that the family rather than the welfare state should take on responsibility for the disabled, the sick, the elderly, the unemployed etc. It was they who established the Child Support Agency in 1993 to chase absent fathers for money to support their children, to ease the costs to the welfare state.

Labour solutions

The Labour government came into power in 1997 with similar concerns about the family, but adopted different, more supportive solutions. For example, since

1997 there has been an emphasis on more resources to encourage better parenting skills, a more generous approach to maternity leave and job protection for working mothers, more financial help for expectant mothers and new parents on low incomes to buy essential items for their new baby, increases in child benefit to help parents look after their children, and better childcare arrangements and more nursery places to support working mothers. The introduction of the national minimum wage and the Working Families Tax Credit has helped low-paid workers, many of whom are women. While supporting the traditional family, Labour has generally been more supportive of alternative living arrangements, with policies like the New Deal for Lone Parents to support lone parents into finding paid work, and a softening of discriminatory policies against homosexuality.

Is the family a declining social institution?

Activity

Below are fourteen statements. Some provide evidence for, and some against, the view that the family is in decline, and some might be used in a conclusion.

- 1 First mark each statement 'for decline', 'against decline' or 'conclusion'.
- 2 Match up the competing arguments for and against which seem most linked to each other.
- 3 Using the material below and the 'organizing work' you have just done, and drawing on ideas of your own and what you've read in this chapter, write a short essay (about one and a half to two sides) answering this question:

To what extent is the family in Britain a declining social institution?

Include arguments for and against, and reach a conclusion.

- (a) Marriages today are more likely to be based on love and companionship rather than the custom and necessity of the past. Of all divorced people, 75 per cent remarry, a third of them within a year of getting divorced. This shows that what they are rejecting is not the institution of marriage itself, but a particular marriage partner – they divorce hoping to turn an unhappy marriage into a new, happier one. The marriages that exist today are therefore probably much stronger and happier than ever, since unhappy relationships are easily ended by divorce.
- (b) It doesn't really matter whether or not couples are married or have been married before, or whether there is one parent or two. Though the form of the family will keep on changing, the importance of the family lies in its role as a stable and supportive unit for one or two adults, whether of the opposite or same sex, and their dependent children. In that sense, the ideal of the family perhaps still remains intact.
- (c) There are well over a million and a half cohabiting couples who have refused to tie the marriage knot – about one in ten of all couples. This is expected to rise to 1.7 million by 2020, making up around one in seven of all 'couple' households. About a quarter of all non-married people were cohabiting in 1999. Living together

before or outside marriage was one of the major social changes of the late twentieth century.

- (d) What really seems to be happening is not so much that the family and marriage are in decline as that they are changing. There are more lone-parent families, more reconstituted families, more gay and lesbian families, more experiments in living together before marriage, and fewer people prepared to marry simply to bring up children. Nevertheless, marriage remains an important social norm, and strong pressures from parents, peer groups and the responsibilities brought about by the birth of children continue to propel most people into marriage.
 - (e) In the 1990s, it was estimated that more than 40 per cent of marriages would end in divorce, with almost one in four children experiencing a parental divorce by their sixteenth birthday.
 - (f) Many of those who cohabit eventually marry – about 60 per cent of first-time cohabitations turn into marriages – and about 75 per cent of the population have been married by the age of 50. It would appear that marriage remains an important social institution, even in the light of the high divorce rate and previous experience of living together outside marriage.
 - (g) Despite the record numbers of children being born outside of marriage, about 80 per cent of those births in 1999 were registered jointly by the parents, and both parents in three out of four of these cases gave the same address. This suggests that most children are still being born into a stable relationship, and live in family situations with concerned parents who are simply reluctant to tie the legal marriage knot. Eighty per cent of dependent children still live in families headed by a married or cohabiting couple.
 - (h) About 40 per cent of births are outside of marriage today.
 - (i) The family has been blamed for a wide range of social ills, such as declining moral standards, social disorder, drug abuse, rising crime rates, vandalism, football hooliganism, educational failure, and increasing levels of violence in society.
 - (j) The Policy Studies Institute has calculated that, if these trends continue, by the year 2010 the majority of couples will cohabit before marriage, the majority of marriages will end in divorce followed by remarriage, and nearly all births will be outside of marriage.
 - (k) The causes of those social problems all too often blamed on the family are many and complex, and those who blame the family are often searching for simple solutions to complex problems.
 - (l) Statistics like these have made the state of the family a major battleground for politicians, with the suggestion that the very existence of the family is threatened by rising rates of divorce, cohabitation, lone parenthood and reconstituted families.
 - (m) In Britain today, nearly a quarter of families with dependent children have just one parent.
 - (n) Although the divorce rate has gone up, the evidence suggests that it is easier divorce laws, the growing economic independence of women, reduced social stigma, and more sympathetic public attitudes which have caused this, rather than more marriage breakdowns. In the past, many couples may have been condemned, by legal and financial obstacles and social intolerance, to suffer unhappy 'empty shell' marriages or to separate without divorcing. If the law were changed to make divorce harder to get, couples would continue to separate without divorcing.
-

Chapter summary

After studying this chapter, you should be able to:

- describe the different forms of marriage, the family and household.
- identify arguments about the universality of the nuclear family.
- explain and criticize the functionalist, Marxist, Marxist feminist and radical feminist perspectives on the family.
- examine the arguments about whether or not the family has lost its functions.
- critically discuss how industrialization changed the family, particularly the debate over the change from a classic extended family to an isolated nuclear family.
- critically examine the links between the isolated nuclear family and industrial society.
- examine the view that roles in marriage and cohabiting relationships have become more equal.
- examine the ways in which women's responsibilities for housework and childcare undermine their positions in paid employment.
- identify the features of domestic labour, and how these differ from paid work.
- identify and explain the main changes in the position of children in the family.
- explain why average family size has decreased.
- explain the reasons for the rising divorce rate, the emergence of the reconstituted family and the groups most 'at risk' of divorce.
- explain why there has been a large increase in the number of lone-parent families.
- explain why there has been a decline in marriage, the growth of cohabitation and more people living alone.
- explain why there are more births outside marriage.
- describe and explain why the 'cereal packet' family is a myth, and identify the diversity of family and household forms in Britain.
- identify and discuss the 'darker side' of family life.
- explain what is meant by 'family ideology' and critically discuss its main features.
- discuss political views of the family and their links with social policies on the family.
- examine the arguments and evidence for and against the view that the family and marriage are of declining social importance.

Key terms

arranged marriage
birth rate
classic extended family
commune
conjugal role
death rate
division of labour
divorce rate
domestic labour

expressive role
extended family
family
family ideology
household
infant mortality rate
instrumental role
integrated conjugal role
kibbutz

kinship	reconstituted family
matriarchy	scapegoat
meritocracy	secondary socialization
modified extended family	secularization
monogamy	segregated conjugal role
nuclear family	serial monogamy
patriarchy	sexual division of labour
polyandry	social construction
polygamy	stereotype
polygyny	structural differentiation
primary socialization	symmetrical family
privatization	

Coursework suggestions

- 1 Investigate how far conjugal roles have really become more integrated, by carrying out a series of interviews with a sample of families to discover how housework and childcare is divided up between women and men in the home – try to interview each partner separately. You might use unstructured interviews to find out how partners feel about the division of household and childcare tasks, and how fair or unfair they think it is.
- 2 Interview a sample of people from different generations, and give a first-hand account of how they feel family life has changed over a period of time.
- 3 Carry out a survey among different age groups within the Asian community to see how they feel about arranged marriages.
- 4 Interview some lone parents, and ask them about the advantages and disadvantages of lone parenthood.
- 5 Investigate attitudes to marriage or cohabitation among a sample of men and women who live alone.

Web sites

<http://freespace.virgin.net/chris.livesey/home.htm>

Sociology Central – an AS-/A-level site, with useful family resources and links to other sites.

<http://www.fpsc.org.uk/>

The Family Policy Studies Centre – all the latest information about what's happening in the family.

<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/>

The site of the Office for National Statistics – if you want the latest family data, here's the place to start.