

CHANGING FAMILY PATTERNS

In the past 40 or 50 years there have been some major changes in family and household patterns. For example:

- The number of traditional nuclear family households – a married couple with their dependent children – has fallen.
- Divorce rates have increased.
- There are fewer first marriages, but more re-marriages.
- People are marrying later in life.
- More couples are cohabiting.
- Same-sex relationships can be legally recognised through civil partnerships or marriages.

- Women are having fewer children and having them later.
- There are more births outside marriage.
- There are more lone-parent families.
- More people live alone.
- There are more stepfamilies, and more couples without children.

In this Topic, we examine the changes in patterns of family life in Britain and the reasons for them. These changes include marriage, cohabitation and divorce. Such changes are contributing to greater family diversity, and we examine how sociologists have interpreted them.

Divorce

We look first at divorce because divorce is a major cause of changing family patterns and greater family diversity. For example, most re-marriages involve a divorcee, and divorce creates both lone-parent families and one-person households.

Changing patterns of divorce

Since the 1960s, there has been a great increase in the number of divorces in the United Kingdom, as Figure 4.4 shows. The number of divorces doubled between 1961 and 1969, and doubled again by 1972. The upward trend continued, peaking in 1993 at 165,000.

Since then, numbers have fallen somewhat, but still stood at 118,000 in 2012 – about six times higher than in 1961. This rate means that about 40% of all marriages will end in divorce.

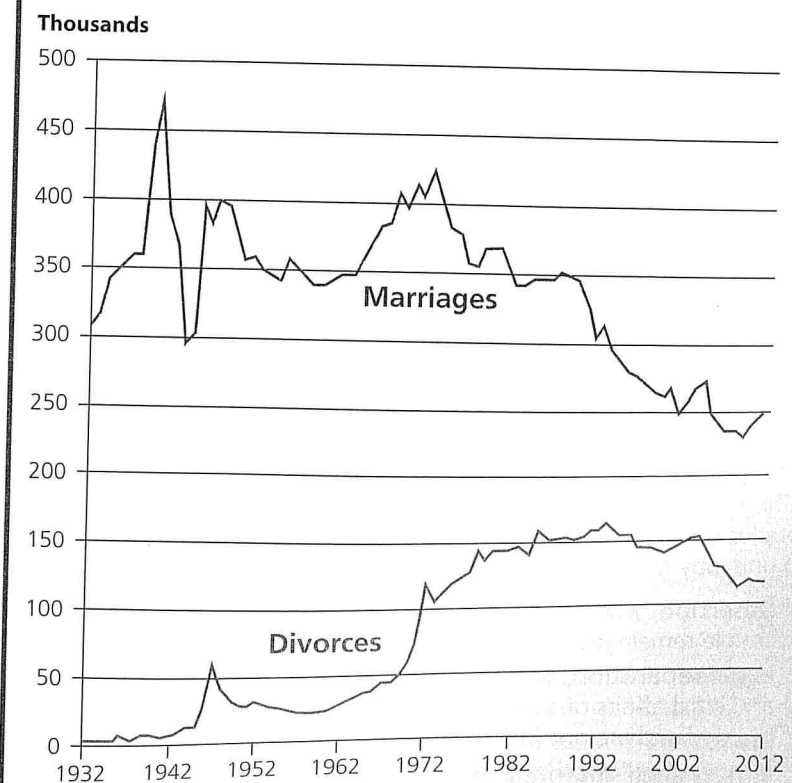
One reason for the fall in the number of divorces since the 1990s is that fewer people are marrying in the first place and are choosing to cohabit instead.

About 65% of petitions (applications) for divorce now come from women. This is in sharp contrast to the situation in the past. For example, in 1946, only 37% of petitions came from women – barely half today's

figure. The commonest reason for a woman to be granted a divorce is the unreasonable behaviour of her husband.

Some couples are more likely than others to divorce. Couples whose marriages are at greatest risk include those who marry young, have a child before they marry or cohabit before marriage, and those where one or both partners have been married before.

Figure 4.4: Marriages and divorces: England and Wales, 1932-2012



Source: ONS

Application

Study Figure 4.4 and answer the following questions:

- 1 Approximately how many divorces were there in 1972?
- 2 Approximately how many marriages were there in 2012?
- 3 Suggest three reasons why the total number of marriages has been declining.

Box 31 A brief history of divorce law

Before 1857, divorce was virtually non-existent and only obtainable by a special and costly Act of Parliament.

- 1857 Men could divorce unfaithful wives, but women also had to prove husbands' cruelty or another matrimonial offence in addition to adultery. Divorce still very costly.
- 1921 3,000 divorces.
- 1923 Grounds for divorce equalised for men and women.
- 1937 Grounds widened to include desertion and cruelty.
- 1949 Legal aid available, making divorce more affordable.
- 1961 27,000 divorces – nine times higher than in 1921.
- 1969 Divorce Law Reform Act passed (came into effect in 1971). The idea of a matrimonial offence or 'guilty party' was abolished. This made 'irretrievable breakdown' of marriage the sole ground for divorce, established by proving unreasonable behaviour, adultery, desertion, or separation

either with or without consent. Divorce available after two years' agreed separation, or five years if only one spouse wants divorce.

- 1984 The minimum period after marriage before a divorce petition could be filed was reduced from three years to one.
- 1996 Family Law Act encourages couples to seek mediation but allows divorce by agreement after a 'period of reflection'.
- 2004 Civil Partnership Act allows for legal dissolution of a civil partnership on the same grounds as for a marriage – irretrievable breakdown.
- 2007 Appeal Court ruling: in divorce settlements, the principle of equality applies, so the starting point is a 50-50 split of all assets, including salaries and pension rights.
- 2014 Same-sex marriages became law. Same grounds for divorce apply to both same-sex and opposite-sex couples.

Explanations for the increase in divorce

Sociologists have identified the following explanations for the increase in divorce.

1 Changes in the law

Divorce was very difficult to obtain in 19th-century Britain, especially for women. Gradually, changes in the law have made divorce easier. There have been three kinds of change in the law:

- Equalising the grounds (the legal reasons) for divorce between the sexes
- Widening the grounds for divorce
- Making divorce cheaper.

When the grounds were equalised for men and women in 1923, this was followed by a sharp rise in the number of divorce petitions from women. Similarly, the widening of the grounds in 1971 to 'irretrievable breakdown' made divorce easier to obtain and produced a doubling of the divorce rate almost overnight. The introduction of legal aid for divorce cases in 1949 lowered the cost of divorcing. Divorce rates have risen with each change in the law. (See Box 31.)

Although divorce is the legal termination of a marriage, couples can and do find other solutions to the problem of an unhappy marriage. These include:

- **Desertion**, where one partner leaves the other but the couple remain legally married
- **Legal separation**, where a court separates the financial and legal affairs of the couple but where they remain married and are not free to re-marry
- **'Empty shell' marriage**, where the couple continue to live under the same roof but remain married in name only.

However, as divorce has become easier to obtain, these solutions have become less popular.

Yet although changes in the law have given people the freedom to divorce more easily, this does not in itself explain why more people should choose to take advantage of this freedom. To fully explain the rise in divorce rates we must therefore look at other changes too. These include changes in public attitudes towards divorce.

2 Declining stigma and changing attitudes

Stigma refers to the negative label, social disapproval or shame attached to a person, action or relationship. In the past, divorce and divorcees have been stigmatised. For example, churches tended to condemn divorce and often refused to conduct marriage services involving divorcees. Juliet Mitchell and Jack Goody (1997) note that an important change since the 1960s has been the rapid decline in the stigma attached to divorce.

As stigma declines and divorce becomes more socially acceptable, couples become more willing to resort to divorce as a means of solving their marital problems.

In turn, the fact that divorce is now more common begins to 'normalise' it and reduces the stigma attached to it. Rather than being seen as shameful, today it is more likely to be regarded simply as a misfortune.

3 Secularisation

Secularisation refers to the decline in the influence of religion in society. Many sociologists argue that religious institutions and ideas are losing their influence and society is becoming more secular. For example, church attendance rates continue to decline.

As a result of secularisation, the traditional opposition of the churches to divorce carries less weight in society and people are less likely to be influenced by religious teachings when making decisions about personal matters such as whether or not to file for divorce.

At the same time, many churches have also begun to soften their views on divorce and divorcees, perhaps because they fear losing credibility with large sections of the public and with their own members.

4 Rising expectations of marriage

Functionalist sociologists such as Ronald Fletcher (1966) argue that the higher expectations people place on marriage today are a major cause of rising divorce rates. Higher expectations make couples less willing to tolerate an unhappy marriage.

This is linked to the ideology of romantic love – an idea that has become dominant over the last couple of centuries. This is the belief that marriage should be based solely on love, and that for each individual there is a Mr or Miss Right out there.

It follows that if love dies, there is no longer any justification for remaining married and every reason to divorce so as to be able to renew the search for one's true soulmate.

In the past, by contrast, individuals often had little choice in who they married, and at a time when the family was also a unit of production, marriages were often contracted largely for economic reasons or out of duty to one's family.

Under these circumstances, individuals were unlikely to have the high expectations about marriage as a romantic union of two souls that many couples have today. Entering marriage with lower expectations, they were therefore less likely to be dissatisfied by the absence of romance and intimacy.

Today, on the other hand, marriage is increasingly viewed not as a binding contract, but as a relationship in which individuals seek personal fulfilment, and this encourages couples to divorce if they do not find it. As Graham Allan and Graham Crow (2001) put it:

'Love, personal commitment and intrinsic satisfaction are now seen as the cornerstones of marriage. The absence of these feelings is itself justification for ending the relationship.'

However, despite today's high divorce rates, functionalists such as Fletcher take an optimistic view. They point to the continuing popularity of marriage. Most adults marry, and the high rate of re-marriage after divorce shows that although divorcees may have become dissatisfied with a particular partner, they have not rejected marriage as an institution.

However, feminist critics argue that this is too rosy a view. They argue that the oppression of women within the



▲ Reduced legal costs have made divorce widely available.

family is the main cause of marital conflict and divorce, but functionalists ignore this. Although functionalists offer an explanation of rising divorce rates, they fail to explain why it is mainly women rather than men who seek divorce.

We should also note that, although most adults do marry, marriage rates have fallen significantly in the past 50 years, as Figure 4.4 shows.

5 Women's increased financial independence

One reason for women's increased willingness to seek divorce is that improvements in their economic position have made them less financially dependent on their husband and therefore freer to end an unsatisfactory marriage.

- Women today are much more likely to be in paid work. The proportion of women working rose from 53% in 1971 to 67% in 2013.
- Although women generally still earn less than men, equal pay and anti-discrimination laws have helped to narrow the pay gap.
- Girls' greater success in education now helps them achieve better-paid jobs than previous generations.
- The availability of welfare benefits means that women no longer have to remain financially dependent on their husbands.

growing acceptance of feminist ideas: women are becoming conscious of patriarchal oppression and more confident about rejecting it.

7 Modernity and individualisation

Sociologists such as Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1992) argue that in modern society, traditional norms, such as the duty to remain with the same partner for life, lose their hold over individuals.

As a result, each individual becomes free to pursue his or her own self-interest. This view has become known as the individualisation thesis.

Relationships thus become more fragile, because individuals become unwilling to remain with a partner if the relationship fails to deliver personal fulfilment. Instead, they seek what Giddens calls the 'pure relationship' – one that exists solely to satisfy each partner's needs and not out of a sense of duty, tradition or for the sake of the children. This results in higher divorce rates.

At the same time, the rising divorce rate 'normalises' divorce and further strengthens the belief that marriage exists solely to provide personal fulfilment.

Modern society also encourages individualism in other ways. For example, women as well as men are now expected to work and are encouraged to pursue their own individual career ambitions. This can cause conflicts of interest between spouses and contribute to marital breakdown.

Some sociologists also argue that modernity encourages people to adopt a neoliberal, consumerist identity based on the idea of freedom to follow one's own self-interest. This pursuit of self-interest is likely to pull spouses apart.

The meaning of a high divorce rate

Sociologists disagree about the effects of today's high divorce rate on society and on individual family members.

The **New Right** see a high divorce rate as undesirable because it undermines marriage and the traditional nuclear family, which they regard as vital to social stability.

In their view, a high divorce rate creates a growing underclass of welfare-dependent female lone parents who are a burden on the state and it leaves boys without the adult male role model they need. They believe it also results in poorer health and educational outcomes for children.

Feminists see a high divorce rate as desirable because it shows that women are breaking free from the oppression of the patriarchal nuclear family.

Postmodernists and the individualisation thesis see a high divorce rate as showing that individuals now have the freedom to choose to end a relationship when it no longer meets their needs. They see it as a major cause of greater family diversity.

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Families and households

Social policy now treats all couples more equally. For example, since 2002, cohabiting couples have had the same right to adopt as married couples. In 2004, the Civil Partnership Act gave same-sex couples similar legal rights to married couples in respect of pensions, inheritance, tenancies and property. Since 2014, same-sex couples have been able to marry.

Chosen families

Jeffrey Weeks (1999) argues that increased social acceptance may explain a trend towards same-sex cohabitation and stable relationships that resemble those found among heterosexuals. Weeks sees gays as creating families based on the idea of 'friendship as kinship', where friendships become a type of kinship network. He describes these as 'chosen families' and argues that they offer the same security and stability as heterosexual families.

Similarly, Kath Weston (1992) describes same-sex cohabitation as 'quasi-marriage' and notes that many gay couples are now deciding to cohabit as stable partners. She contrasts this with the gay lifestyle of the 1970s, which largely rejected monogamy and family life in favour of casual relationships.

Others sociologists have noted the effect on same-sex relationships of a legal framework such as civil partnerships and marriage. For example, Allan and Crow argue that, because of the absence of such a framework until recently, same-sex partners have had to negotiate their commitment and responsibilities more than married couples. This may have made same-sex relationships both more flexible and less stable than heterosexual relationships.

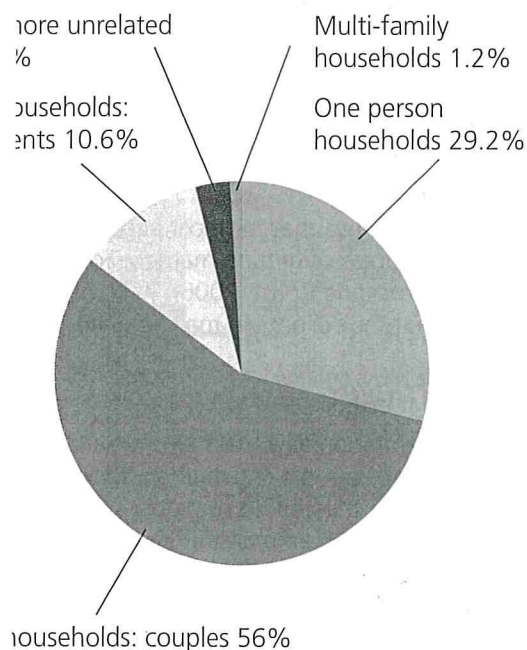
Similarly, Anna Einasdottir (2011) notes that, while many gays and lesbians welcome the opportunity to have their partnerships legally recognised, others fear that it may limit the flexibility and negotiability of relationships. Rather than adopt what they see as heterosexual relationship norms, they wish their relationships to be different.

One-person households

Fewer people today are living in couples:

- There has been a big rise in the number of people living alone. In 2013, almost three in ten households (7.7 million people) contained only one person – nearly three times the figure for 1961. (See Figure 4.6.)
- 40% of all one-person households are over 65. Pensioner one-person households have doubled since 1961, while those of non-pensioners tripled. Men under 65 were the group most likely to live alone.
- By 2033, over 30% of the adult population will be single (unpartnered and never-married).

Figure 4.6: Households in the UK: by household type, 2013



...ed to keep their own home, because of a previous relationship or because it was 'too early' to cohabit.

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Reasons for the changes

...s for the increase in births outside marriage a decline in stigma and increase in cohabitation. mple, only 28% of 25-34 year olds now think je should come before parenthood.

...er age at which women are having children, family sizes and the fact that more women are ng childless, all reflect the fact that women now ore options than just motherhood. Many are j to establish themselves in a career before starting /, or instead of having children at all.

Under slavery, when couples were sold separately, children stayed with the mother. It is argued that this established a pattern of family life that persists today. It is also argued that male unemployment and poverty have meant that black men are less able to provide for their family, resulting in higher rates of desertion or marital breakdown.

However, Heidi Safia Mirza (1997) argues that the higher rate of lone-parent families among blacks is not the result of disorganisation, but rather reflects the high value that black women place on independence. Tracey Reynolds (2010) argues that the statistics are misleading, in that many apparently 'lone' parents are in fact in stable, supportive but non-cohabiting relationships.

Asian families

Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian households tend to be larger than those of other ethnic groups, at 4.4, 4.3 and 3 persons per household respectively, compared with 2.4 for both Black Caribbean and White British households.

Such households sometimes contain three generations, but most are in fact nuclear rather than extended. Larger household sizes are partly a result of the younger age profile of British Asians, since a higher proportion are in the childbearing age groups compared with the population as a whole.

Larger Asian households also to some extent reflect the value placed on the extended family in Asian cultures. However, practical considerations, such as the need for assistance when migrating to Britain, are also important. For example, Roger Ballard (1982) found that extended family ties provided an important source of support among Asian migrants during the 1950s and 1960s.

In this early period of migration, houses were often shared by extended families. Later, although most Asian households were now nuclear, relatives often lived nearby. There was frequent visiting, and kinship networks continued to be a source of support. Today, Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus are still more likely than other ethnic or religious groups to live in extended family units.

The extended family today

The existence of the extended family among minority ethnic groups raises the question of how widespread or important this kind of family is in the UK today. As we saw in Topic 3, according to functionalists such as Parsons, the extended family is the dominant family type in pre-industrial society, but in modern industrial society it is replaced by the nuclear family.

For example, as Nickie Charles' (2008) study of Swansea found, the classic three-generation family all living together under one roof is now "all but extinct". The only significant exceptions she found were among the city's Bangladeshi community.

However, while the extended family may have declined, it has not entirely disappeared. Instead, as Peter Willmott (1988) argues, it continues to exist as a 'dispersed extended family', where relatives are geographically separated but maintain frequent contact through visits and phone calls.

Similarly, Mary Chamberlain's (1999) study of Caribbean families in Britain found that, despite being geographically dispersed, they continue to provide support. She describes them as 'multiple nuclear families' with close and frequent contact between siblings, uncles, aunts and cousins, who often make a big contribution to childrearing.

As Chamberlain suggests, the extended family survives because it performs important functions

for its members. For example, Colin Bell's (1968) earlier research in Swansea found that both working-class and middle-class families had emotional bonds with kin and relied on them for support:

- Among the middle class, there was more financial help from father to son.



▲ Three generations celebrate a wedding, Bethnal Green, 1952. Is the extended family now 'all but extinct'?

- Working-class families had more frequent contact (they lived closer) and there was more domestic help from mothers to daughters.

The 'beanpole' family

Bell's findings suggest the importance of the so-called 'beanpole' family. The beanpole family is a particular type of extended family, which Julia Brannen (2003) describes as 'long and thin':

- It is extended vertically (up and down) through three or more generations: grandparents, parents and children.
- But it is not extended horizontally (sideways): it doesn't involve aunts, uncles, cousins etc.

For example, Charles found the same high level of contact between mothers and adult daughters that Bell had found in the 1960s. However, in the case of brothers and sisters, there had been a sharp decline in both support and contact. This suggests a 'beanpole' structure.

Beanpole families may partly be the result of two demographic changes:

- Increased life expectancy means more surviving grandparents and great-grandparents.
- Smaller family sizes mean people have fewer siblings and thus fewer horizontal ties.

Obligations to relatives

Yet despite the rise of the beanpole family, many people still feel a sense of obligation to help their wider extended kin. For example, Janet Finch and Jennifer Mason (1993) found that over 90% of people had given or received financial help, and about half had cared for a sick relative.

However, there is some variability in what can be expected of different relatives. For example, Finch and Mason found that more is expected of females than males. Similarly, Cheal (2002) argues that, when it comes to help with household tasks:

'A systematic set of rules exists for deciding who has the greatest obligation to assist. Help should be given: first, by a spouse; second, by a daughter; third, by a daughter-in-law; fourth, by a son; fifth, by other relatives; and sixth, by non-relatives.'

Cheal notes that where personal care for an elderly woman is needed, a daughter or daughter-in-law is preferred if the husband is not available. Sons are rarely chosen as caregivers for an elderly woman. On the other hand, daughters are rarely chosen as appropriate people to provide money.

But while daughters are more likely than sons to take responsibility for the care of elderly relatives, not all the daughters in a family necessarily play an equal part. As Mason (2011) found, much depends on the history of the relationship, the particular obligations women feel towards their relatives, and what other responsibilities they have that would give them 'legitimate excuses' not to be involved.

Application

What 'legitimate excuses' might people give for not offering help to relatives who are in need?

Similarly, Finch and Mason found that the principle of reciprocity or balance is also important – people felt that help received should be returned to avoid any feelings of indebtedness.

Overall, evidence suggests that the extended family continues to play an important role for many people today, providing both practical and emotional support when called upon. However, this is very different from Parsons' classic extended family, whose members lived and worked together, and who were bound by strong mutual obligations. Nevertheless, some sense of obligation does remain, at least to some kin and as a last resort in times of crisis.

Activity Research

Patterns of obligation

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Topic summary

Recent decades have seen some major changes in family patterns. Changes in partnerships include fewer first marriages, more divorces, re-marriages and cohabitations. Changing patterns of parenting include more births outside marriage, lone parents and stepfamilies. There are more one-person households and same-sex families. There are also ethnic differences in household composition. The extended family survives mainly in dispersed form.

Reasons for these changes include greater individualism, secularisation, reduced stigma and changes in attitudes, changes in the law (e.g. regarding divorce and homosexuality) and in the position of women.

FAMILY DIVERSITY

The changing family patterns that we examined in Topic 5 are bringing about increased family diversity in the UK today. For example, there are now fewer households containing a nuclear family and more lone-parent families and one-person households than there were in the 1970s. More couples, both straight and gay, now cohabit, many more children are born outside marriage than previously, and many more marriages end in divorce.

In this Topic, we turn our attention to the ways in which sociologists have classified the different types of family diversity and how they have tried to understand the causes and meaning of increased diversity today.

For example, does family diversity mean the breakdown of the family – or a new era of choice and personal fulfilment? Will individuals and society benefit from increased diversity, or is the decline of the traditional family likely to damage us?

Modernism and the nuclear family

Perspectives such as functionalism and the New Right have been described as 'modernist'. That is, they see modern society as having a fairly fixed, clear-cut and predictable structure. They see one 'best' family type – the nuclear family – as slotting into this structure and helping to maintain it by performing certain essential functions.

or conventional patriarchal nuclear family consisting of a married couple and their dependent children, with a clear-cut division of labour between the breadwinner-husband and homemaker-wife.

Functionalism

Thus, according to Talcott Parsons, there is a 'functional fit' between the nuclear family and modern society. As we saw in Topic 3, Parsons sees the nuclear family as uniquely suited to meeting the needs of modern society for a geographically and socially mobile workforce, and as performing two 'irreducible functions' – the primary socialisation of children and the stabilisation of adult personalities. These contribute to the overall stability and effectiveness of society.

In the functionalist view, therefore, because of the family's ability to perform these essential functions, we can generalise about the type of family that we will find in modern society - namely, a nuclear family with a division of labour between husband and wife.

Hence, other family types can be considered as dysfunctional, abnormal or even deviant, since they are less able to perform the functions required of the family.

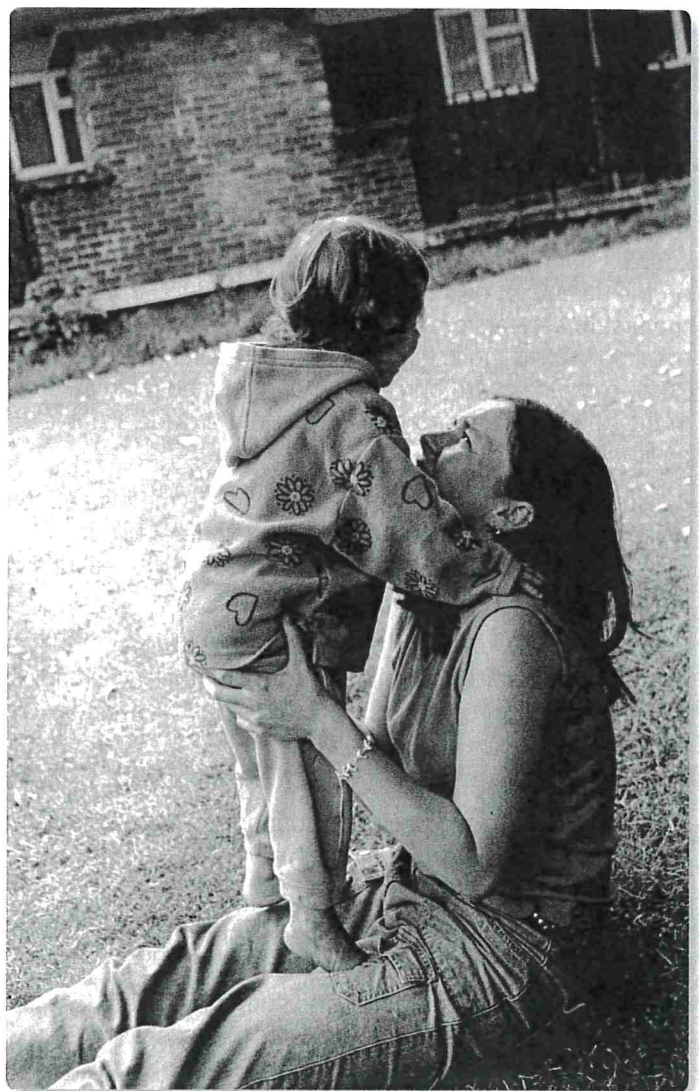
Analysis and Evaluation

Why do functionalists believe that the nuclear family enables the workforce in modern society to be geographically and socially mobile?

The New Right

The New Right have a conservative and anti-feminist perspective on the family. They are firmly opposed to family diversity.

Like functionalists, the New Right hold the view that there is only one correct or normal family type. This is the traditional



▲ Are lone-parent families dysfunctional?

This is the same as the functionalist distinction between the instrumental and expressive roles performed by husband and wife respectively (see Topic 1).

The New Right see this family as 'natural' and based on fundamental biological differences between men and women. In their view, this family is the cornerstone of society; a place of refuge, contentment and harmony.

The New Right oppose most of the changes in family patterns that we examined in Topic 5, such as cohabitation, gay marriage and lone parenthood. They argue that the decline of the traditional nuclear family and the growth of family diversity are the cause of many social problems.

In particular, the New Right are concerned about the growth of lone-parent families, which they see as resulting from the breakdown of couple relationships. They see lone-parent families as harmful to children. They argue that:

- Lone mothers cannot discipline their children properly.
- Lone-parent families leave boys without an adult male role model, resulting in educational failure, delinquency and social instability.
- Such families are also likely to be poorer and thus a burden on the welfare state and taxpayers.

Cohabitation versus marriage

The New Right claim that the main cause of lone-parent families is the collapse of relationships between cohabiting couples. For example, Harry Benson (2006) analysed data on the parents of over 15,000 babies. He found that, over the first three years of the baby's life, the rate of family breakdown was much higher among cohabiting couples: 20%, compared with only 6% among married couples. In the New Right view, only marriage can provide a stable environment in which to bring up children.

Benson (2010; 2011) argues that couples are more stable when they are married. For example, the rate of divorce among married couples is lower than the rate of breakups among cohabiting couples.

In Benson's view, marriage is more stable because it requires a deliberate commitment to each other, whereas cohabitation allows partners to avoid commitment and responsibility.

New Right thinkers and Conservative politicians have used such evidence and arguments to support the view that both the family and society at large are 'broken'.

- They argue that only a return to 'traditional values', including the value of marriage, can prevent social disintegration and damage to children.
- They regard laws and policies such as easy access to divorce, gay marriage and widespread availability of welfare benefits as undermining the conventional family.

Benson therefore argues that government needs to encourage couples to marry by means of policies that support marriage. (For more on the New Right view of government policy and the family, see Topic 7.)

Activity Media

The conventional nuclear family

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Criticisms of the New Right

The New Right view has been criticised:

- The feminist Ann Oakley (1997) argues that the New Right wrongly assume that husbands and wives' roles are fixed by biology. Instead, cross-cultural studies show great variation in the roles men and women perform within the family. Oakley believes that the New Right view of the family is a negative reaction against the feminist campaign for women's equality.
- Feminists also argue that the conventional nuclear family favoured by the New Right is based on the patriarchal oppression of women and is a fundamental cause of gender inequality. In their view, it prevents women working, keeps them financially dependent on men, and denies them an equal say in decision-making.
- Critics of the New Right argue that there is no evidence that children in lone-parent families are more likely to be delinquent than those brought up in a two-parent family of the same social class.
- The New Right view that marriage equals commitment, while cohabitation does not, has been challenged. As we saw in Topic 5, it depends on the meaning of the relationship to those involved. Some people see cohabitation as a temporary phase, while others see it as a permanent alternative to marriage.
- The rate of cohabitation is higher among poorer social groups. Therefore, as Carol Smart (2011) points out, it may be poverty that causes the breakdown of relationships, rather than the decision not to marry.

Chester: the neo-conventional family

Robert Chester (1985) recognises that there has been some increased family diversity in recent years. However, unlike the New Right, he does not regard this as very significant, nor does he see it in a negative light. Chester argues that the only important change is a move from the dominance of the traditional or conventional nuclear family, to what he describes as the 'neo-conventional family'.

By the conventional family, Chester means the type of nuclear family described by the New Right and Parsons, with its division of labour between a male breadwinner and a female homemaker.

CHAPTER 4

Life-stage diversity Family structures differ according to the stage reached in the life cycle – for example, young newlyweds, couples with dependent children, retired couples whose children have grown up and left home, and widows who are living alone.

Generational diversity Older and younger generations have different attitudes and experiences that reflect the historical periods in which they have lived. For example, they may have different views about the morality of divorce or cohabitation.

Application

In what ways might cultural factors affect family structures and relationships?

Activity Research

How different generations view family diversity

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Postmodernism and family diversity

As we have seen, modernist perspectives such as functionalism emphasise the dominance of one family type in modern society, namely the nuclear family. Modernist approaches take a structural or 'top down' view. That is, they see the family as a structure that shapes the behaviour of its members so that they perform the functions society requires.

In this view, individuals have no real choice about the pattern of family life. In terms of family patterns, our behaviour is orderly, structured and predictable: most people marry, go on to have children and so on. At most, there may be some limited variety in family life, such as the five types of diversity identified by the Rapoport.

Box 32 Postmodern society and the family

Postmodernists argue that since the late 20th century, society has entered a new 'postmodern' phase. Postmodern society has two key characteristics:

Diversity and fragmentation Society today is increasingly fragmented, with an ever greater diversity of cultures and lifestyles – more a collection of subcultures than a single culture shared by all. People can 'pick and mix', creating their identities and lifestyles from a wide range of choices. For example, different ethnic and youth subcultures, sexual preferences, and social movements such as environmentalism, all offer sources of identity from which we can choose.

Rapid social change New technology and the electronic media have dissolved old barriers of time and space, transformed our patterns of work and leisure, and accelerated the pace of change. One effect of this rapid social change is to make life less predictable.

Not surprisingly, family life in postmodern society is therefore less stable, but at the same time it gives individuals more choice about their personal relationships. As a result, family life is now much more diverse than previously. This means it is no longer possible to generalise about it in the way that modernist sociologists such as Parsons have done in the past.

By contrast, postmodernists such as David Cheal (1993) go much further than the Rapoport. Postmodernists start from the view that we no longer live in 'modern' society with its predictable, orderly structures such as the nuclear family. In their view, society has entered a new, chaotic, postmodern stage.

In postmodern society, there is no longer one single, dominant, stable family structure such as the nuclear family. Instead, family structures have become fragmented into many different types and individuals now have much more choice in their lifestyles, personal relationships and family arrangements (see Box 32).

Some writers argue that this greater diversity and choice brings with it both advantages and disadvantages:

- It gives individuals greater freedom to plot their own life course – to choose the kind of family and personal relationships that meet their needs.
- But greater freedom of choice in relationships means a greater risk of instability, since these relationships are more likely to break up.

Stacey: postmodern families

Judith Stacey (1998) argues that greater freedom and choice has benefited women. It has enabled them to free themselves from patriarchal oppression and to shape their family arrangements to meet their needs.

Stacey used life history interviews to construct a series of case studies of postmodern families in Silicon Valley, California. She found that women rather than men have been the main agents of changes in the family.

For example, many of the women she interviewed had rejected the traditional housewife-mother role. They had worked, returned to education as adults, improved their job prospects, divorced and re-married. These women had often created new types of family that better suited their needs.

One of these new family structures Stacey calls the 'divorce-extended family', whose members are connected by divorce rather than marriage. The key members are usually female and may include former in-laws, such as mother- and daughter-in-law, or a man's ex-wife and his new partner.

For example, Stacey describes in one of her case studies how Pam Gamma created a divorce-extended family. Pam married young, then divorced and cohabited for several years before re-marrying. Her second husband had also been married before.

By the time the children of Pam's first marriage were in their twenties, she had formed a divorce-extended family with Shirley, the woman cohabiting with her first husband. They helped each other financially and domestically, for example by exchanging lodgers in response to the changing needs of their households.

Such cases illustrate the idea that postmodern families are diverse and that their shape depends on the active choices people make about how to live their lives — for example, whether to get divorced, cohabit, come out as gay etc.

Thus, as David Morgan (1996; 2011) argues, it is pointless trying to make large-scale generalisations about 'the family' as if it were a single thing, as functionalists do. Rather, a family is simply whatever arrangements those involved choose to call their family. In this view, sociologists should focus their attention on how people create their own diverse family lives and practices. One way of exploring this is by means of life course analysis, as Box 33 explains.

The individualisation thesis

While not accepting everything postmodernism says about the nature of society today, sociologists such as Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck have been influenced by postmodernist ideas about today's society and have applied some of these to understanding family life.

In particular, Giddens and Beck explore the effects of increasing individual choice upon families and relationships. Their views have therefore become known as the individualisation thesis.

The individualisation thesis argues that traditional social structures such as class, gender and family have lost much of their influence over us. According to the thesis, in the past, people's lives were defined by fixed roles that largely prevented them from choosing their own life course. For example, everyone was expected to marry and to take up their appropriate gender role. By contrast, individuals in today's society have fewer such certainties or fixed roles to follow.

According to the individualisation thesis, therefore, we have become freed or 'disembedded' from traditional roles and structures, leaving us with more freedom to choose how we lead our lives. As Beck (1992) puts it, the 'standard biography' or life course that people followed in the past



▲ Flat hunting. Does having your own place mean you are an adult?

has been replaced by the 'do-it-yourself biography' that individuals today must construct for themselves.

For Giddens and Beck, this change has huge implications for family relationships and family diversity, which we shall now examine.

Box 33 Life course analysis

Life course analysis is a method of research developed by Tamara Hareven (1978). Using in-depth, unstructured interviews, it explores the meanings that individual family members give to the relationships they have and the choices they make at various turning points in their lives, such as the decision to have a baby or come out as gay.

Similarly, Clare Holdsworth and David Morgan (2005) examine what it means for young people to leave home and become independent or 'adult' and how parents, friends and others influence their decisions.

In the view of its supporters, life course analysis has two major strengths:

- 1 It focuses on what family members themselves consider important, rather than what sociologists may regard as important. It looks at families and households from the viewpoint of the people involved and the meanings they give to their lives, relationships and choices.
- 2 It is particularly suitable for studying families in today's postmodern or 'late modern' society, where there is more choice about personal relationships and more family diversity. Family structures are increasingly just the result of the choices made by their members.

Giddens: choice and equality

Anthony Giddens (1992) argues that in recent decades the family and marriage have been transformed by greater choice and a more equal relationship between men and women. This transformation has occurred because:

- Contraception has allowed sex and intimacy rather than reproduction to become the main reason for the relationship's existence.
- Women have gained independence as a result of feminism and because of greater opportunities in education and work.

As a result, the basis of marriage and the family has changed. Giddens argues that in the past, traditional family relationships were held together by external forces such as the laws governing the marriage contract and by powerful norms against divorce and sex outside marriage.

By contrast, today couples are free to define their relationship themselves, rather than simply acting out roles that have been defined in advance by law or tradition. For example, a couple nowadays don't have to marry to have children and divorce is readily accessible so they don't have to stay together 'til death do us part'.

The pure relationship

According to Giddens, what holds relationships together today is no longer law, religion, social norms or traditional institutions. Instead, intimate relationships nowadays are based on individual choice and equality.

Giddens describes this kind of relationship as the 'pure relationship'. He sees the pure relationship as typical of today's late modern society, in which relationships are no longer bound by traditional norms.

The key feature of the pure relationship is that it exists solely to satisfy each partner's needs. As a result, the relationship is likely to survive only so long as both partners think it is in their own interest to do so. Couples stay together because of love, happiness or sexual attraction, rather than because of tradition, a sense of duty or for the sake of the children.

Individuals are thus free to choose to enter and to leave relationships as they see fit. Relationships become part of the process of the individual's self-discovery or self-identity: trying different relationships becomes a way of establishing 'who we are'.

However, Giddens notes that with more choice, personal relationships inevitably become less stable. The pure relationship is a kind of 'rolling contract' that can be ended more or less at will by either partner, rather than a permanent commitment. This in turn produces greater family diversity by creating more lone-parent families, one person households, stepfamilies and so on.

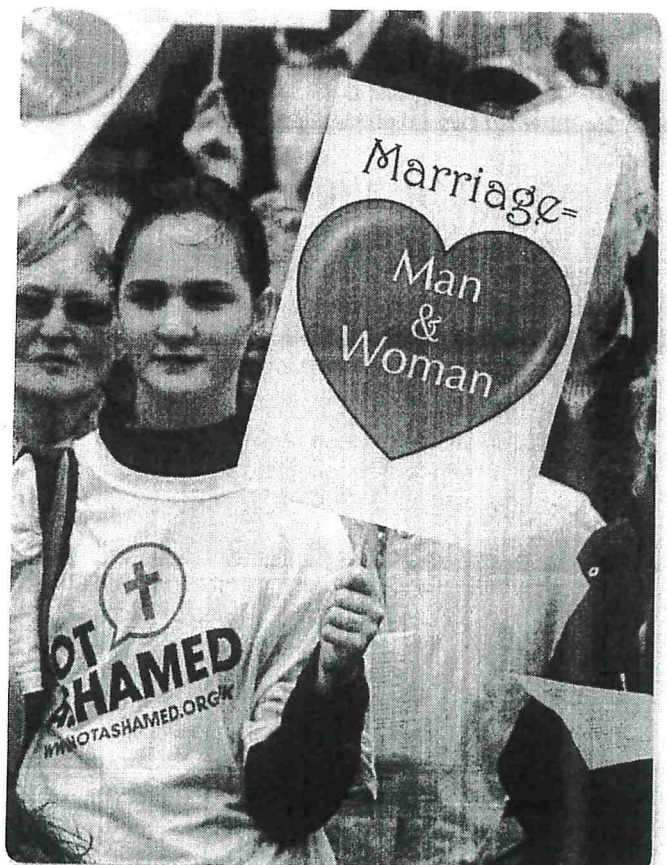
Same-sex couples as pioneers

Giddens sees same-sex relationships as leading the way towards new family types and creating more democratic and equal relationships.

In Giddens' view, this is because same-sex relationships are not influenced by tradition to the extent that heterosexual relationships are (indeed they have generally been stigmatised and even criminalised). As a result, same-sex couples have been able to develop relationships based on choice rather than on traditional roles, since these were largely absent.

This has enabled those in same-sex relationships to negotiate personal relationships and to actively create family structures that serve their own needs, rather than having to conform to pre-existing norms in the way that heterosexual couples have traditionally had to do.

For example, Weston (1992) found that same-sex couples created supportive 'families of choice' from among friends, former lovers and biological kin, while Weeks (2000) found that friendship networks functioned as kinship networks for gay men and lesbians.



▲ Christians protesting outside Parliament against the Marriage Bill that allows gay couples to marry.

Beck: the negotiated family

Another version of the individualisation thesis is put forward by Ulrich Beck (1992). Beck argues that we now live in a 'risk society' where tradition has less influence and people have more choice. As a result, we are more aware of risks. This is because making choices involves calculating the risks and rewards of the different options open to us.

This contrasts with an earlier time when people's roles were more fixed by tradition and rigid social norms dictated how they should behave.

For example, in the past, people were expected to marry for life and, once married, men were expected to play the role of breadwinner and disciplinarian and to make the important financial decisions, while women took responsibility for the housework, childcare and care of the sick and elderly.

Although this traditional patriarchal family was unequal and oppressive, it did provide a stable and predictable basis for family life by defining each member's role and responsibilities. However, the patriarchal family has been undermined by two trends:

- Greater gender equality, which has challenged male domination in all spheres of life. Women now expect equality both at work and in marriage.
- Greater individualism, where people's actions are influenced more by calculations of their own self-interest than by a sense of obligation to others.

These trends have led to a new type of family replacing the patriarchal family. Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995) call this the 'negotiated family'. Negotiated families do not conform to the traditional family norm, but vary according to the wishes and expectations of their members, who decide what is best for themselves by negotiation. They enter the relationship on an equal basis.

Application

Suggest three reasons why there is now greater gender equality in the family and society.

However, although the negotiated family is more equal than the patriarchal family, it is less stable. This is because individuals are free to leave if their needs are not met. As a result, this instability leads to greater family diversity by creating more lone-parent families, one person households, re-marriages and so on.

the zombie family

Although in today's uncertain risk society people turn to the family in the hope of finding security, in reality family relationships are themselves now subject to greater risk and uncertainty than ever before.

For this reason, Beck describes the family as a 'zombie category': it appears to be alive, but in reality it is dead. People want it to be a haven of security in an insecure world, but today's family cannot provide this because of its own instability.

The personal life perspective

Sociologists who take a personal life perspective, such as Carol Smart (2007) and Vanessa May (2013), agree that there is now more family diversity but they disagree with Beck and Giddens' explanation of it. They make several criticisms of the individualisation thesis.

criticisms of the individualisation thesis

Firstly, the individualisation thesis exaggerates how much choice people have about family relationships today. As Shelley Budgeon (2011) notes, this reflects the neoliberal ideology that individuals today have complete freedom of choice. In reality, however, traditional norms that limit people's relationship choices have not weakened as much as the thesis claims.

Secondly, the thesis wrongly sees people as disembedded, 'free-floating', independent individuals. It ignores the fact that our decisions and choices about personal relationships are made within a social context.

Thirdly, the individualisation thesis ignores the importance of structural factors such as social class inequalities and patriarchal gender norms in limiting and shaping our relationship choices.

As May notes, this is because Giddens' and Beck's view of the individual is simply 'an idealised version of a white, middle-class man'. They ignore the fact that not everyone has the same ability as this privileged group to exercise choice about relationships.

The connectedness thesis

Reflecting these criticisms, sociologists from the personal life perspective propose an alternative to the individualisation thesis. Smart calls this the 'connectedness thesis'.

Instead of seeing us as disembedded, isolated individuals with limitless choice about personal relationships, Smart argues that we are fundamentally social beings whose choices are always made 'within a web of connectedness'.

According to the connectedness thesis, we live within networks of existing relationships and interwoven personal histories, and these strongly influence our range of options and choices in relationships.

For example, Finch and Mason's (1993) study of extended families found that, although individuals can to some extent negotiate the relationships they want, they are also

CHAPTER 4

embedded within family connections and obligations that restrict their freedom of choice. (For more on Finch and Mason, see page 222.)

Such findings challenge the notion of the pure relationship. Families usually include more than just the couples that Giddens focuses on, and even couple relationships are not always 'pure' relationships that we can walk away from at will.

For example, parents who separate remain linked by their children, often against their wishes. As Smart says, 'where lives have become interwoven and embedded, it becomes impossible for relationships to simply end'. Smart therefore emphasises the importance of always putting individuals in the context of their past and the web of relationships that shape their choices and family patterns.

class and gender

The connectedness thesis also emphasises the role of the class and gender structures in which we are embedded. These structures limit our choices about the kinds of relationships, identities and families we can create for ourselves. For example:

- After a divorce, gender norms generally dictate that women should have custody of the children, which may limit their opportunity to form new relationships. By contrast, men are freer to start new relationships and second families.
- Men are generally better paid than women and this gives them greater freedom and choice in relationships.
- The relative powerlessness of women and children as compared with men means that many lack freedom to choose and so remain trapped in abusive relationships.

Application

In what ways might an individual's age or ethnicity limit their choices about the kinds of family and personal relationships they can create?

The power of structures

As we saw earlier, Beck and Giddens argue that there has been a disappearance or weakening of the structures of class, gender and family that traditionally controlled our lives and limited our choices.

However, as May argues, these structures are not disappearing, they are simply being re-shaped. For example, while women in the past 150 years have gained important

rights in relation to voting, divorce, education and employment, this does not mean that they now 'have it all'.

For example, while women can now pursue traditionally 'masculine' goals such as careers, they are still expected to be heterosexual. As Anna Einasdottir (2011) argues, while lesbianism is now tolerated, heteronormativity (norms favouring heterosexuality) means that many lesbians feel forced to remain 'in the closet' and this limits their choices about their relationships and lifestyles.

Thus, the personal life perspective does not see increased diversity simply as a result of greater freedom of choice, as Beck and Giddens do. Instead, it emphasises the importance of social structures in shaping the freedoms many people now have to create more diverse types of families.

Thus, although there is a trend towards greater diversity and choice, the personal life perspective emphasises the continuing importance of structural factors such as patriarchy and class inequality in restricting people's choices and shaping their family lives.

Activity Discussion

Is the nuclear family best?

...go to www.sociology.uk.net



Topic summary

Modernists such as functionalists and the New Right see only the nuclear family as normal and other family types as deviant. Chester sees only one major change – the neo-conventional family – whereas the Rapoport's identify five types of diversity.

Sociologists influenced by postmodernism believe that in today's postmodern society, individuals have more choice in their relationships and family practices.

The individualisation thesis argues that traditional structures have lost influence, leading to more choice and diversity but also more risk and instability. Individuals now seek the pure relationship, based solely on satisfying their own needs.

The connectedness thesis argues that people are not simply isolated individuals and that wider structures still limit choice and diversity.