

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.

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:

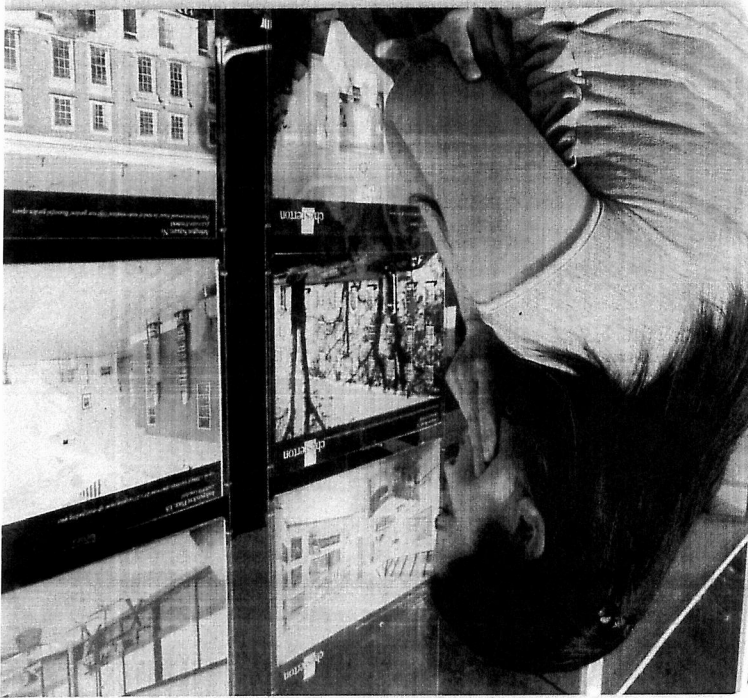
- It gives individuals greater freedom to plot their own life course – to choose the kind of family and personal relationships that meet their needs.
- But greater freedom of choice in relationships means a greater risk of instability, since these relationships are more likely to break up.

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.



▲ 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.

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 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: 201) 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 'disembodied' 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

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.

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

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 household, 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.

the zombie family

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.

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.

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 free 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

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.

Activity Discussion

Is the nuclear family best?

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

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 Einasdotir (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.