

CHAPTER 8

Families and households

It is no longer possible to pronounce in some binding way what family, marriage, parenthood, sexuality or love mean, what they should or could be; rather these vary in substance, norms and morality from individual to individual and from relationship to relationship. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995

- 460 Is the family universal?
- 462 The family – a functionalist perspective
- 464 Marxist perspectives on the family
- 465 Feminist perspectives on the family
- 466 Marxist feminist perspectives on the family
- 467 Radical feminist perspectives on the family
- 470 Difference feminism
- 473 The family, industrialization and modernization
- 482 Family diversity
- 495 The changing functions of the family
- 497 Conjugal roles
- 501 Marriage, marital breakdown and family decline
- 508 The family, politics and social policy
- 512 Families, modernity and postmodernity



Introduction

The family has often been regarded as the cornerstone of society. In premodern and modern societies alike it has been seen as the most basic unit of social organization and one which carries out vital tasks, such as socializing children.

Until the 1960s few sociologists questioned the importance or the benefits of family life. Most sociologists assumed that family life was evolving as modernity progressed, and that the changes involved made the family better suited to meeting the needs of society and of family members. A particular type of family, the **nuclear family** (based around a two-generation household of parents and their children), was seen as well adapted to the demands of modern societies.

From the 1960s, an increasing number of critical thinkers began to question the assumption that the family was necessarily a beneficial institution. Feminists, Marxists and critical psychologists began to highlight what they saw as some of the negative effects and the 'dark side' of family life.

In the following decades the family was not just under attack from academic writers. Social changes also seemed to be undermining traditional families. Rising divorce rates, cohabitation before marriage, increasing numbers of single-parent families and single-person households, and other trends all suggested that individuals were basing their lives less and less around conventional families.

Some have seen these changes as a symptom of greater individualism within modern societies. They have welcomed what appears to be an increasing range of choice for individuals. People no longer have to base their lives around what may be outmoded and, for many, unsuitable conventional family structures. Others, however, have lamented the changes and worried about their effect on society. Such changes are seen as both a symptom and a cause of instability and insecurity in people's lives and in society as a whole. This view has been held by traditionalists who want a return to the ideal of the nuclear family. For them, many of society's problems are a result of increased family instability.

Some postmodernists argue that there has been a fundamental break between the modern family and the postmodern family. They deny that any one type of family can be held up as the norm against which other family types can be compared. While modern societies might have had one central, dominant family type, this is no longer the case. As a result, it is no longer possible to produce a theory of 'the family'. Different explanations are needed for different types of family.

Alongside these developments in society and sociology, family life has become a topic of political debate. What was once largely seen as a private sphere, in which politicians should not interfere, is now seen as a legitimate area for public debate and political action. As concern has grown in



some quarters about the alleged decline of the family, politicians have become somewhat more willing to comment on families. Sometimes they have devised policies to try to deal with perceived problems surrounding the family.

In short, the family has come to be seen as more problematic than it was in the past. The controversies that have come to surround families and households are the subject of this chapter. We begin by examining the assumption of the 'universality' of the family.

Is the family universal?

George Peter Murdock: the family – a universal social institution

In a study entitled *Social Structure* (1949), George Peter Murdock examined the institution of the family in a wide range of societies. Murdock took a sample of 250 societies, ranging from small hunting and gathering bands to large-scale industrial societies. He claimed that some form of family existed in every society, and concluded, on the evidence of his sample, that the family is universal.

Murdock defined the family as follows:

The family is a social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults. Murdock, 1949

Thus the family lives together, pools its resources and works together, and produces offspring. At least two of the adult members conduct a sexual relationship according to the norms of their particular society.

Such norms vary from society to society. For example, among the Banaro of New Guinea, the husband does not have sexual relations with his wife until she has borne a child by a friend of his father. The parent-child relationship, therefore, is not necessarily a biological one. Its importance is primarily social, children being recognized as members of a particular family whether or not the adult spouses have biologically produced them.

Variations in family structure

The structure of the family varies from society to society. The smallest family unit is known as the **nuclear family** and consists of a husband and wife and their immature offspring. Units larger than the nuclear family are usually known as **extended families**. Such families can be seen as **extensions** of the basic nuclear unit, either **vertical extensions** – for example, the addition of members of a third generation such as the spouses' parents – and/or **horizontal extensions** – for example, the addition of

members of the same generation as the spouses, such as the husband's brother or an additional wife. Thus the functionalist sociologists Bell and Vogel define the extended family as 'any grouping broader than the nuclear family which is related by descent, marriage or adoption'.

Either on its own or as the basic unit within an extended family, Murdock found that the nuclear family was present in every society in his sample. This led him to conclude:

The nuclear family is a universal human social grouping. Either as the sole prevailing form of the family or as the basic unit from which more complex forms are compounded, it exists as a distinct and strongly functional group in every known society. Murdock, 1949

However, as we will discover in the following sections, Murdock's conclusions might not be well founded.

Kathleen Gough – the Nayar

Some societies have sets of relationships between kin which are quite different from those which are common in Britain. One such society was that of the Nayar of Kerala in southern India, prior to British rule being established in 1792. Sociologists disagree about whether this society had a family system or not, and thus whether or not it disproves Murdock's claim that the family is universal.

Kathleen Gough (1959) provided a detailed description of Nayar society. Before puberty all Nayar girls were ritually married to a suitable Nayar man in the *tali* rite. After the ritual marriage had taken place, however, the *tali* husband did not live with his wife, and was under no obligation to have any contact with her whatsoever. The wife owed only one duty to her *tali* husband: she had to attend his funeral to mourn his death.

Once a Nayar girl reached or neared puberty she began to take a number of visiting husbands, or *sandbanham* husbands. The Nayar men were usually professional warriors who spent long periods of time away from their villages acting as mercenaries. During their time in the villages they were allowed to visit any number of Nayar women who had undergone the *tali* rite and who were members of the same caste as themselves, or a lower caste. With the agreement of the woman involved, the *sandbanham* husband arrived at the home of one of his wives after supper, had sexual intercourse with her, and left before breakfast the next morning. During his stay he placed his weapons outside the building to show the other *sandbanham* husbands that he was there. If they arrived too late, then they were free to sleep on the veranda, but could not stay the night with their wife. Men could have unlimited numbers of *sandbanham* wives, although women seem to have been limited to no more than twelve visiting husbands.

An exception to the family?

Sandbanham relationships were unlike marriages in most societies in a number of ways:

- 1 They were not a lifelong union: either party could terminate the relationship at any time.
- 2 *Sandbanham* husbands had no duty towards the offspring of their wives. When a woman became

pregnant, it was essential according to Nayar custom that a man of appropriate caste declared himself to be the father of the child by paying a fee of cloth and vegetables to the midwife who attended the birth. However, it mattered little whether or not he was the biological parent, so long as someone claimed to be the father, because he did not help to maintain or socialize the child.

- 3 Husbands and wives did not form an economic unit. Although husbands might give wives token gifts, they were not expected to maintain them – indeed, it was frowned upon if they attempted to. Instead, the economic unit consisted of a number of brothers and sisters, sisters' children, and their daughters' children. The eldest male was the leader of each group of kin.

Nayar society, then, was a **matrilineal** society. Kinship groupings were based on female biological relatives and marriage played no significant part in the formation of households, in the socializing of children, or in the way that the economic needs of the members of society were met.

In terms of Murdock's definition, no family existed in Nayar society, since those who maintained 'a sexually approved adult relationship' did not live together and cooperate economically. Only the women lived with the children. Therefore, either Murdock's definition of the family is too narrow, or the family is not universal.

Gough claimed that marriage, and by implication the family, existed in Nayar society. In order to make this claim, though, she had to broaden her definition of marriage beyond that implied in Murdock's definition of the family. She defined marriage as a relationship between a woman and one or more persons in which a child born to the woman 'is given full birth-status rights' common to normal members of the society.

Matrifocal families – an exception to the rule?

Murdock's definition of the family includes at least one adult of each sex. However, both today and in the past, some children have been raised in households that do not contain adults of both sexes. Usually these households have been headed by women.

A significant proportion of black families in the islands of the West Indies, parts of Central America such as Guyana, and the USA do not include adult males. The 'family unit' often consists of a woman and her dependent children, sometimes with the addition of her mother. This may indicate that the family is not universal as Murdock suggests, or that it is necessary to redefine the family and state that the minimal family unit consists of a woman and her dependent children, own or adopted, and that all other family types are additions to this unit.

Female-headed families are sometimes known as **matriarchal** families and sometimes as **matrifocal** families, although both of these terms have been used in a number of senses. We will use the term 'matrifocal family' here to refer to female-headed families.

Can we then see the matrifocal family as an exception to Murdock's claim that the family is universal, or, if it is accepted as a family, as an exception to his claim that the nuclear family is a universal social group?

Support for Murdock

Supporters of Murdock could argue that the matrifocal family usually makes up a minority of families and is not regarded as the norm in any of the societies mentioned above. Furthermore, matrifocal families could be seen as the result of nuclear families breaking down rather than being an alternative family form which is valued and which people aspire to.

However, even if matrifocal families are in the minority, this does not necessarily mean that they cannot be recognized as an alternative family structure. In many societies which practise polygyny, polygynous marriages are in the minority, yet sociologists accept them as a form of extended family.

Members of matrifocal families regard the unit as a family and, from her West Indian data, González (1970) argues that the female-headed family is a well-organized social group which represents a positive adaptation to the circumstances of poverty. By not tying herself to a husband, the mother is able to maintain casual relationships with a number of men who can provide her with financial support. She retains strong links with her relatives, who give her both economic and emotional support.

The above arguments suggest that the matrifocal family can be regarded as a form of family structure in its own right. If these arguments are accepted, it is possible to see the matrifocal family as the basic, minimum family unit and all other family structures as additions to this unit.

The female-carer core

This view is supported by Yanina Sheeran. She argues that the female-carer core is the most basic family unit:

The female-carer unit is the foundation of the single-mother family, the two-parent family, and the extended family in its many forms. Thus it is certainly the basis of family household life in Britain today, and is a ubiquitous phenomenon, since even in South Pacific longhouses, pre-industrial farmsteads, communes and Kibbutzim, we know that female carers predominate. Sheeran, 1993

In Britain, for example, Sheeran maintains that children usually have one woman who is primarily responsible for their care. These primary carers are often but not always the biological mother; they may 'occasionally be a grandmother, elder sister, aunt, adoptive mother or other female'.

Sheeran seems to be on strong ground in arguing that a female-carer core is a more basic family unit than that identified by Murdock, since in some societies families without an adult male are quite common. However, she herself admits that in Britain a small minority of lone-parent households are headed by a man. Thus it is possible to argue that the female-carer core is not the basis of every individual family, even if it is the basis of most families in all societies.

Matrifocal families, and one-parent families in general, are becoming more common in Britain. We will consider the significance of this development later in this chapter (see pp. 485–8).

Gay families

Another type of household that may contradict Murdock's claims about the universality of the family, as defined by him, is the gay or lesbian household. By definition, such households will not contain 'adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship' (Murdock, 1949). Such households may, however, include children who are cared for by two adult females or two adult males. The children may have been adopted, or be the result of a previous heterosexual relationship, or they may have been produced using new reproductive technologies involving sperm donation or surrogate motherhood. A lesbian may have sex with a man in order to conceive a child to be raised by her and her female partner.

Most children of gay couples result from a previous heterosexual relationship. Lesbian mothers are more common than gay fathers, due to the difficulties gay men are likely to encounter in being granted custody or adopting children. Official statistics are not produced on the number of gay couples raising children, but there is little doubt that the numbers are increasing. This raises the question of whether such households should be regarded as families.

Rather like lone-parent families, households with gay parents are seen by some as not being 'proper' families. In most Western societies the gay couple will not be able to marry and any children will have a genetic connection with only one of the partners. However, Sidney Callahan (1997) argued that such households should still be seen as families. He claimed that, if marriage were available, many gay and lesbian couples would marry. Furthermore, he believed that the relationships involved are no different in any fundamental way from those in heterosexual households. Callahan therefore claimed that gay and lesbian households with children should be regarded as a type of family, at least where the gay or lesbian relationship is intended to be permanent. He concluded:

I would argue that gay or lesbian households that consist of intimate communities of mutual support and that display permanent shared commitments to intergenerational nurturing share the kinship bonding we observe and name as family. Callahan, 1997

Although gay couples still cannot marry in Britain, since December 2005 they have been able to register a civil partnership. Civil partnerships give gay couples many of the same legal rights as married couples. Figures released by National Statistics show that a total of 15,672 civil partnerships were registered in the UK between December 2005 and the end of December 2006. An unknown number of these civil partners were looking after children, but the fact that these couples have registered civil partnerships does seem to strengthen Callahan's claim that they should be seen as families.

The universality of the family – conclusion

Whether the family is regarded as universal ultimately depends on how the family is defined. Clearly, though, a

wide variety of domestic arrangements have been devised by human beings which are quite distinctive from the 'conventional' families of modern industrial societies. As Diana Gittins (1993) puts it, 'Relationships are universal, so is some form of co-residence, of intimacy, sexuality and emotional bonds. But the forms these can take are infinitely variable and can be changed and challenged as well as embraced.'

It may be a somewhat pointless exercise to try to find a single definition which embraces all the types of household and relationship that can reasonably be called families.

Having examined whether the family is universal, we will now examine various perspectives on the role of families in society.

The family – a functionalist perspective

George Peter Murdock – the universal functions of the family

Functions for society

From his analysis of 250 societies, Murdock (1949) argued that the family performs four basic functions in all societies, which he termed the **sexual, reproductive, economic** and **educational**. They are essential for social life since without the sexual and reproductive functions there would be no members of society, without the economic function (for example, the provision and preparation of food) life would cease, and without education (a term Murdock uses for socialization) there would be no culture. Human society without culture could not function.

Clearly, the family does not perform these functions exclusively. However, it makes important contributions to them all and no other institution has yet been devised to match its efficiency in this respect. Once this is realized, Murdock claimed, 'The immense utility of the nuclear family and the basic reason for its universality thus begin to emerge in strong relief.'

Functions for individuals and society

The family's functions for society are inseparable from its functions for its individual members. It serves both at one and the same time and in much the same way. The sexual function provides a good example of this. Husband and wife have the right of sexual access to each other, and in most societies there are rules forbidding or limiting sexual activity outside marriage. This provides sexual gratification for the spouses. It also strengthens the family, since the powerful and often binding emotions which accompany sexual activities unite husband and wife.

The sexual function also helps to stabilize society. The rules which largely contain sexual activity within the family prevent the probable disruptive effects on the social order that would result if the sex drive were allowed 'free play'. The family thus provides both 'control and expression' of sexual drives, and in doing so performs important functions, not only for its individual members, but also for the family as an institution and for society as a whole.

Murdock applied a similar logic to the economic function. He argued that, like sex, it is 'most readily and satisfactorily achieved by persons living together'. He referred in glowing terms to the division of labour within the family, whereby the husband specializes in certain activities, the wife in others. For example, in hunting societies men kill game animals which provide meat for their wives to cook and skins for them to make into clothing. This economic cooperation within the family not only fulfils the economic function for society as a whole, but also provides 'rewarding experiences' for the spouses working together, which 'cement their union'.

Murdock argued that his analysis provided a 'conception of the family's many-sided utility and thus of its inevitability'. He concluded: 'No society has succeeded in finding an adequate substitute for the nuclear family, to which it might transfer these functions. It is highly doubtful whether any society will ever succeed in such an attempt.'

Criticisms of Murdock

Murdock's picture of the family is rather like the multi-faceted, indispensable boy-scout knife. The family is seen as a multi-functional institution which is indispensable to society. Its 'many-sided utility' accounts for its universality and its inevitability.

In his enthusiasm for the family, however, Murdock did not seriously consider whether its functions could be performed by other social institutions and he does not examine alternatives to the family. As D.H.J. Morgan (1975) notes in his criticism, Murdock does not state 'to what extent these basic functions are inevitably linked with the institution of the nuclear family'.

In addition, Murdock's description of the family is almost too good to be true. As Morgan states, 'Murdock's nuclear family is a remarkably harmonious institution. Husband and wife have an integrated division of labour and have a good time in bed.' As we will see in later sections, some other researchers do not share Murdock's emphasis on harmony and integration.

Talcott Parsons – the 'basic and irreducible' functions of the family

Parsons (1959, 1965b) concentrated his analysis on the family in modern American society. Despite this, his ideas have a more general application, since he argued that the American family retains two 'basic and irreducible functions' which are common to the family in all societies. These are the 'primary socialization of children' and the 'stabilization of the adult personalities of the population of the society'.

Primary socialization

Primary socialization refers to socialization during the early years of childhood, which takes place mainly within the family. **Secondary socialization** occurs during the later years when the family is less involved and other agencies (such as the peer group and the school) exert increasing influence.

There are two basic processes involved in primary socialization: the **internalization of society's culture** and the **structuring of the personality**.

If culture were not internalized – that is, absorbed and accepted – society would cease to exist, since without shared norms and values social life would not be possible. However, culture is not simply learned, it is 'internalized as part of the personality structure'. The child's personality is moulded in terms of the central values of the culture to the point where they become a part of him or her. In the case of American society, personality is shaped in terms of independence and achievement motivation, which are two of the central values of American culture.

Parsons argued that families 'are "factories" which produce human personalities'. He believed they are essential for this purpose, since primary socialization requires a context which provides warmth, security and mutual support. He could conceive of no institution other than the family that could provide this context.

Stabilization of adult personalities

Once produced, the personality must be kept stable. This is the second basic function of the family: the **stabilization of adult personalities**. The emphasis here is on the marriage relationship and the emotional security the couple provide for each other. This acts as a counterweight to the stresses and strains of everyday life, which tend to make the personality unstable.

This function is particularly important in Western industrial society, since the nuclear family is largely isolated from kin. It does not have the security once provided by the close-knit extended family. Thus the married couple increasingly look to each other for emotional support.

Adult personalities are also stabilized by the parents' role in the socialization process. This allows them to act out 'childish' elements of their own personalities which they have retained from childhood but which cannot be indulged in adult society. For example, father is 'kept on the rails' by playing with his son's train set.

According to Parsons, therefore, the family provides a context in which husband and wife can express their childish whims, give and receive emotional support, recharge their batteries, and so stabilize their personalities.

Criticisms of Parsons

This brief summary of Parsons's views on the family is far from complete. Other aspects will be discussed later in this chapter (pp. 474–5; see also Chapter 2, p. 96), but here we will consider some of the arguments which criticize his perspective:

- 1 As with Murdock, Parsons has been accused of idealizing the family with his picture of well-

adjusted children and sympathetic spouses caring for each other's every need. It is a typically optimistic, modernist theory which may have little relationship to reality.

- 2 His picture is based largely on the American middle-class family, which he treats as representative of American families in general. As Morgan (1975) states, 'there are no classes, no regions, no religious, ethnic or status groups, no communities' in Parsons's analysis of the family. For example, Parsons fails to explore possible differences between middle-class and working-class families, or different family structures in minority ethnic communities.
- 3 Like Murdock, Parsons largely fails to explore functional alternatives to the family. He does recognize that some functions are not necessarily tied to the family. For instance, he notes that the family's economic function has largely been taken over by other agencies in modern industrial society. However, his belief that its remaining functions are 'basic and irreducible' prevents him from examining alternatives to the family.
- 4 Parsons's view of the socialization process can be criticized. He sees it as a one-way process, with the children being pumped full of culture and their personalities being moulded by powerful parents. He tends to ignore the two-way interaction process between parents and children. There is no place in his scheme for the children who twist their parents around their little finger.
- 5 Parsons sees the family as a distinct institution which is clearly separated from other aspects of social life. Some contemporary perspectives on the family deny that such clear-cut boundaries can be established (see pp. 516–17). The family as such cannot therefore be seen as performing any particular functions on its own in isolation from other institutions.

The very positive view of the family advanced by functionalists has not been supported by sociologists who advocate more radical and conflict perspectives. These include Marxists, feminists and some postmodernists. Their views will now be examined.

Marxist perspectives on the family

Friedrich Engels – the origin of the family

The earliest view of the family developed from a Marxist perspective is contained in Friedrich Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Engels, 1972, first published 1884).

Like many nineteenth-century scholars, Engels took an evolutionary view of the family, attempting to trace

its origin and evolution through time. He combined an evolutionary approach with Marxist theory, arguing that, as the mode of production changed, so did the family.

During the early stages of human evolution, Engels believed the means of production were communally owned and the family as such did not exist. This era of **primitive communism** was characterized by promiscuity. There were no rules limiting sexual relationships and society was, in effect, the family.

Although Engels has been criticized for this type of speculation, the anthropologist Kathleen Gough argues that his picture may not be that far from the truth. She notes that the nearest relatives to human beings, chimpanzees, live in 'promiscuous hordes', and this may have been the pattern for early humans.

The evolution of the family

Engels argued that, throughout human history, more and more restrictions were placed on sexual relationships and the production of children. He speculated that, from the promiscuous horde, marriage and the family evolved through a series of stages, which included polygyny, to its present stage, the monogamous nuclear family. Each successive stage placed greater restrictions on the number of mates available to the individual.

The monogamous nuclear family developed with the emergence of private property, in particular the private ownership of the means of production, and the advent of the state. The state instituted laws to protect the system of private property and to enforce the rules of monogamous marriage. This form of marriage and the family developed to solve the problem of the inheritance of private property. Property was owned by males and, in order for them to be able to pass it on to their heirs, they had to be certain of the legitimacy of those heirs. They therefore needed greater control over women so that there would be no doubt about the paternity of the offspring. The monogamous family provided the most efficient device for this purpose. In Engels's words:

It is based on the supremacy of the man, the express purpose being to produce children of undisputed paternity; such paternity is demanded because these children are later to come into their father's property as his natural heirs. Engels, 1972, first published 1884

Evidence for Engels's views

Engels's scheme of the evolution of the family is much more elaborate than the brief outline described above. It was largely based on *Ancient Society*, an interpretation of the evolution of the family by the nineteenth-century American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan.

Modern research has suggested that many of the details of Engels's scheme are incorrect. For example, monogamous marriage and the nuclear family are often found in hunting and gathering bands. Since humanity has lived in hunting and gathering bands for the vast majority of its existence, the various forms of group marriage postulated by Engels (such as the promiscuous horde) may well be figments of his imagination.

However, Gough (1972) argues that 'the general trend of Engels' argument still appears sound'. Although nuclear families and monogamous marriage exist in small-scale societies, they form a part of a larger kinship group. When individuals marry they take on a series of duties and obligations to their spouse's kin. Communities are united by kinship ties and the result is similar to a large extended family. Gough argues:

It is true that although it is not a group marriage in Engels' sense, marriage has a group character in many hunting bands and in most of the more complex tribal societies that have developed with the domestication of plants and animals. With the development of privately owned, heritable property, and especially with the rise of the state, this group character gradually disappears.

Gough, 1972

Further aspects of Engels's views on the family are examined in Chapter 2, pp. 106–7.

Eli Zaretsky – personal life and capitalism

Eli Zaretsky (1976) analysed developments in the family in industrial societies from a Marxist perspective. He argues that the family in modern capitalist society creates the illusion that the 'private life' of the family is quite separate from the economy. Before the early nineteenth century the family was the basic unit of production. For example, in the early capitalist textile industry, production of cloth took place in the home and involved all family members. Only with the development of factory-based production were work and family life separated.

In a society in which work was alienating, Zaretsky claims the family was put on a pedestal because it apparently 'stood in opposition to the terrible anonymous world of commerce and industry'. The private life of the family provided opportunities for satisfactions that were unavailable outside the walls of the home.

Zaretsky welcomes the increased possibilities for a personal life for the proletariat offered by the reduction in working hours since the nineteenth century. However, he believes the family is unable to provide for the psychological and personal needs of individuals. He says, 'it simply cannot meet the pressures of being the only refuge in a brutal society'. The family artificially separates and isolates personal life from other aspects of life. It might cushion the effects of capitalism but it perpetuates the system and cannot compensate for the general alienation produced by such a society.

Furthermore, Zaretsky sees the family as a major prop to the capitalist economy. The capitalist system is based upon the domestic labour of housewives who reproduce future generations of workers. He also believes the family has become a vital unit of consumption. The family consumes the products of capitalism and this allows the bourgeoisie to continue producing surplus value. To Zaretsky, only socialism will end the artificial separation of family private life and public life, and produce the possibility of personal fulfilment.

Criticisms

Jennifer Somerville (2000) argues that Zaretsky, even after the qualifications he makes, exaggerates the importance of the family as a refuge from life in capitalist society. She suggests that Zaretsky underestimates 'the extent of cruelty, violence, incest and neglect' within families. He also exaggerates the extent to which family life is separated from work. According to Somerville, during the early stages of capitalism most working-class women had to take paid work in order for the family to survive financially, and relatively few stayed at home as full-time housewives. Somerville herself advocates a feminist approach (see p. 470), and we will now start to examine competing feminist views on the family.

Feminist perspectives on the family

The influence of feminism

In recent decades feminism has probably had more influence on the study of the family than any other approach to understanding society. Like Marxists, feminists have been highly critical of the family. However, unlike other critics, they have tended to emphasize the harmful effects of family life upon women. In doing so, they have developed new perspectives and highlighted new issues.

Feminists have, for example, introduced the study of areas of family life such as housework and domestic violence into sociology. They have challenged some widely held views about the inevitability of male dominance in families and have questioned the view that family life is becoming more egalitarian. Feminists have also highlighted the economic contribution to society made by women's domestic labour within the family.

Above all, feminist theory has encouraged sociologists to see the family as an institution involving power relationships. It has challenged the image of family life as being based upon cooperation, shared interests and love, and has tried to show that some family members, in particular men, obtain greater benefits from families than others.

Recently, some feminists have questioned the tendency of other feminists to make blanket condemnations of family life. Some have argued that feminists should recognize the considerable improvements in family life for women over the last few decades. Others have emphasized the different experiences of women in families. Some feminists have rejected the idea that there is such a thing as 'the family' rather than simply different domestic arrangements. All feminists, however, continue to argue that family life still disadvantages women in some ways.

In later sections of this chapter we will consider the impact of feminism on the study of conjugal roles,

domestic labour, social policy and marriage. In the next section, however, we will examine some of the feminist theoretical approaches to understanding the family.

Marxist feminist perspectives on the family

Marxists such as Engels and Zaretsky acknowledge that women are exploited in marriage and family life but they emphasize the relationship between capitalism and the family, rather than the family's effects on women. Marxist feminists use Marxist concepts but see the exploitation of women as a key feature of family life. The next few sections will examine how these theories have been applied to the family. (More details of the Marxist feminist approach can be found in Chapter 2, pp. 101–2.)

The production of labour power

Margaret Benston stated:

The amount of unpaid labour performed by women is very large and very profitable to those who own the means of production. To pay women for their work, even at minimum wage scales, would involve a massive redistribution of wealth. At present, the support of the family is a hidden tax on the wage earner – his wage buys the labour power of two people. Benston, 1972

The fact that the husband must pay for the production and upkeep of future labour acts as a strong discipline on his behaviour at work. He cannot easily withdraw his labour with a wife and children to support. These responsibilities weaken his bargaining power and commit him to wage labour. Benston argues:

As an economic unit, the nuclear family is a valuable stabilizing force in capitalist society. Since the husband–father's earnings pay for the production which is done in the home, his ability to withhold labour from the market is much reduced. Benston, 1972

Not only does the family produce and rear cheap labour, it also maintains it at no cost to the employer. In her role as housewife, the woman attends to her husband's needs, thus keeping him in good running order to perform his role as a wage labourer.

Fran Ansley (1972) translates Parsons's view that the family functions to stabilize adult personalities into a Marxist framework. She sees the emotional support provided by the wife as a safety valve for the frustration produced in the husband by working in a capitalist system. Rather than being turned against the system which produced it, this frustration is absorbed by the comforting wife. In this way the system is not threatened. In Ansley's words:

When wives play their traditional role as takers of shit, they often absorb their husbands' legitimate anger and frustration at their own powerlessness and oppression. With every worker provided with a sponge to soak up his possibly revolutionary ire, the bosses rest more secure.
Quoted in Bernard, 1976

Ideological conditioning

The social reproduction of labour power does not simply involve producing children and maintaining them in good health. It also involves the reproduction of the attitudes essential for an efficient workforce under capitalism. Thus, David Cooper (1972) argues that the family is 'an ideological conditioning device in an exploitive society'. Within the family, children learn to conform and to submit to authority. The foundation is therefore laid for the obedient and submissive workforce required by capitalism.

A similar point is made by Diane Feeley (1972), who argues that the structure of family relationships socializes the young to accept their place in a class-stratified society. She sees the family as an authoritarian unit dominated by the husband in particular and adults in general. Feeley claims that the family with its 'authoritarian ideology is designed to teach passivity, not rebellion'. Thus children learn to submit to parental authority and emerge from the family preconditioned to accept their place in the hierarchy of power and control in capitalist society.

Criticisms

Some of the criticisms of previous views of the family also apply to Marxist approaches. There is a tendency to talk about 'the family' in capitalist society without regard to possible variations in family life between social classes, ethnic groups, heterosexual and gay and lesbian families, lone-parent families, and over time. As Morgan (1975) notes in his criticism of both functionalist and Marxist approaches, both 'presuppose a traditional model of the nuclear family where there is a married couple with children, where the husband is the breadwinner and where the wife stays at home to deal with the housework'. This pattern is becoming less common and the critique of this type of family may therefore be becoming less important.

Marxist feminists may therefore exaggerate the harm caused to women by families and may neglect the effects of non-family relationships (apart from class) on exploitation within marriage. Thus, for example, they say little about how the experience of racism might influence families. They also tend to portray female family members as the passive victims of capitalist and patriarchal exploitation. They ignore the possibility that women may have fought back against such exploitation and had some success in changing the nature of family relationships. Furthermore, they are not usually prepared to concede that there may be positive elements to family life. As we shall see, some liberal feminists and difference feminists are more prepared to accept that there may be some positive advantages for women in some families.

Radical feminist perspectives on the family

There are many varieties of radical feminism. However, Valerie Bryson (1992) argues that they share at least one characteristic in common. According to her, all radical feminism 'sees the oppression of women as the most fundamental and universal form of domination'. Society is seen as **patriarchal**, or male-dominated, rather than capitalist, and women are held to have different interests from those of men.

Radical feminists do not agree on the source of male domination, but most do see the family as important in maintaining male power. We will now analyse a range of major radical feminist theories of the family.

Christine Delphy and Diana Leonard – *Familial Exploitation*

Types of feminism

Christine Delphy and Diana Leonard (1992) are unlike most radical feminists in that they attach considerable importance to material factors in causing women's oppression. In this respect their views have some similarity with Marxist feminist theories. In particular, Delphy and Leonard attach special importance to work and say that their approach 'uses Marxist methodology'. Nevertheless, they see themselves as radical feminists since they believe that it is men, rather than capitalists or capitalism, who are the primary beneficiaries of the exploitation of women's labour. To them, the family has a central role in maintaining patriarchy:

We see the familial basis of domestic groups as an important element in continuing the patriarchal nature of our society: that is, in the continuance of men's dominance over women and children. Delphy and Leonard, 1992

The family as an economic system

Delphy and Leonard see the family as an **economic system**. It involves a particular set of 'labour relations in which men benefit from, and exploit, the work of women – and sometimes that of their children and other male relatives'. The key to this exploitation is that family members work not for themselves but for the head of the household. Women in particular are oppressed, not because they are socialized into being passive, but because their work is appropriated within the family.

Delphy and Leonard identify the following features as the main characteristics of the family as an economic system:

- 1 Every family-based household has a social structure that involves two types of role. These are head of household and their dependants or helpers. Female

heads of household are uncommon – the vast majority are men.

- 2 The male head of household is different from other members because he 'decides what needs doing in a given situation' and assigns tasks to other members or delegates to them. Other family members may change his mind about decisions, but it is his mind to change. He makes the final decision.
- 3 The head of household provides maintenance for other family members, and they receive a share of family property on his death. However, they have to work for him unpaid.
- 4 The type and amount of work family members have to do are related to sex and marital status. Female relatives have to do unpaid domestic work; wives in addition have to carry out 'sexual and reproductive work'. Although the precise allocation of tasks varies from household to household, domestic work remains a female responsibility.
- 5 Money and resources for maintenance, and money inherited by dependants, are not related to the amount of work done. A man must provide for his dependants' basic needs, and may be very generous, but, unlike an employer, he does not purchase labour power by the hour, week or amount produced. The amounts inherited by family members are related more to position – with, for example, sons inheriting more than daughters – than to work.
- 6 The relations of production within the family often, therefore, involve payment in kind (such as a new coat or a holiday) rather than payment in money.
- 7 The economic relationships rarely involve formal contracts or bargaining. This means family members must use informal methods of negotiation. For example, 'Wives and children have to study their husbands and fathers closely and handle them carefully so as to keep them sweet.'
- 8 'The head of the family may have a near monopoly over, and he always has greater access to and control of, the family's property and external relations.'
- 9 When dependants, particularly wives, have paid employment outside the home, they still have to carry out household tasks, or pay others out of their wages to do housework or care for children for them.

Who gets what from the family

Having outlined how the family works as an economic system, Delphy and Leonard go on to examine in more detail who contributes to and who benefits from family life. They admit that most men do some housework, but point out that such tasks are usually done by women. They claim that time-budget studies show that women do about twice as much domestic work each day as men. Furthermore, women are still expected to care for children and the sick, except in special circumstances (for example, if the wife is disabled).

As well as carrying out housework and caring for children, the sick and older people, women also contribute a great deal to their husbands' work and leisure by providing 'for their emotional and sexual well-being'.

Drawing on the work of a British sociologist, Janet Finch, Delphy and Leonard describe some of the types of

help provided by wives. Sometimes they provide direct help – for example, doing office work for a self-employed husband, or doing constituency work if he is an MP. They may stay at home to answer the phone or arrange dinner parties for colleagues of their husband.

Wives also give moral support, ‘observing and moderating his emotions, arranging entertainment and relaxation, and supplying personal needs’. Wives are there to listen when their husbands unburden themselves of their work problems. They provide ‘trouble-free sex’, which is important since ‘men frequently unwind best post-coitally’. Wives also make the house into a home so that it is ‘comfortable, warm and undemanding’. Women even control their own emotions so that they can provide emotional care for husbands. They ‘flatter, excuse, boost, sympathize and pay attention to men’, all to give them a sense of well-being.

In contrast, men make little contribution to their wives’ work and the husband’s career remains the central one.

Delphy and Leonard believe, then, that wives contribute much more work to family life than their husbands. Despite this, they get fewer of the material benefits of family life than men. Men retain ultimate responsibility for family finances, and women consume less than male family members. The (usually) male head of household has the ‘decision-making power’ to determine what goods are produced or bought for the family and who uses them. For instance, ‘the food bought is the sort he likes, and he gets more of it and the best bits’.

Husbands get more leisure time, more access to the family car, or to the best car if there is more than one; and sons get more spent on their education than daughters. In every area of family consumption it is the status of different family members which shapes who gets what.

Empirical evidence

Delphy and Leonard use four main sources to try to back up their claims. Three of these are studies of British factory workers and their families. They use Goldthorpe and Lockwood’s 1962 study of affluent workers in Luton (see pp. 58–9 for further details), a 1970s study of 500 workers and their wives in a Bristol company which made cardboard packing cases, and a 1980s study of redundant steel workers in Port Talbot, Wales. They also use data from Christine Delphy’s own studies of French farming families. In these studies they found some evidence to support their theories. In all these contexts they found that men were dominant and women did a disproportionate share of the work.

Conclusion and summary

Delphy and Leonard believe the family is a patriarchal and hierarchical institution through which men dominate and exploit women. Men are usually the head of household, and it is the head who benefits from the work that gets done. Women provide ‘57 varieties of unpaid service’ for men, including providing them with a ‘pliant sexual partner and children if he wants them’. Wives do sometimes resist their husbands’ dominance – they are not always passive victims – but ‘economic and social constraints’ make it difficult for women to escape from the patriarchal family.

Evaluation

Delphy and Leonard provide a comprehensive analysis of the family from a radical feminist perspective. They highlight many ways in which the family can produce or reinforce inequalities between women and men. However, their work can be criticized both theoretically and empirically:

- 1 Theoretically, Delphy and Leonard do not succeed in demonstrating that inequality is built into the structure of the family. Their argument is based upon the assumption that all families have a head, usually a man, and it is the head who ultimately benefits from family life. However, they do not show theoretically or empirically that all families have a head who has more power than other family members, or that power is never shared equally between men and women.
- 2 Empirically, their work is based upon unrepresentative data. The three British studies used are all of manual workers, and all of them are dated. Most researchers have found less gender inequality in middle-class families than in working-class families.
- 3 Delphy’s study of French farming families was specifically directed at testing their theories, but farming families are hardly typical of other families. Family members tend to work in the family business – the farm – and few wives have an independent source of income which could reduce marital inequality.

Delphy and Leonard tend to make rather sweeping statements about inequality which may not apply equally to all families. In doing so they perhaps overstate their case by denying the possibility of exceptions.

Germaine Greer – *The Whole Woman and the family*

Germaine Greer is another radical feminist who argues that family life continues to disadvantage and oppress women (Greer, 2000). Greer believes that there are many non-economic aspects to the exploitation of women in families and she therefore takes a wider view than Delphy and Leonard. Greer’s general views are examined in Chapter 2 (see p. 135); this section will focus on her specific comments on the family.

Women as wives

Greer argues there is a strong ideology suggesting that being a wife (or as she puts it a ‘female consort’) is the most important female role. The wives of presidents and prime ministers get considerable publicity, but the likes of Hillary Clinton and Cherie Blair have to be very much subservient to their husbands. Such a role demands that the woman

must not only be seen to be at her husband’s side on all formal occasions, she must also be seen to adore him, and never to appear less than dazzled by everything he may say or do. Her eyes should be fixed on him but he should do his best never to be caught looking at her. The relationship must be clearly seen to be unequal. Greer, 2000

This inequality extends to all other, less celebrated relationships, but this does little to undermine the enthusiasm of women for getting married. Greer complains that the ‘ghastly figure of the bride still walks abroad’, and notes that the average wedding costs over £10,000. However, the honeymoon period will not last for ever, and inequalities will soon appear:

Having been so lucky as to acquire a wife, [the husband] begins to take the liberties that husbands have traditionally taken, comes and goes as he pleases, spends more time outside the connubial home, spends more money on himself, leaves off the share of the housework that he may have formerly done. She sees her job as making him happy; he feels that in marrying her he has done all that is necessary in making her happy. Greer, 2000

Yet all this is a ‘con’ because it is men who need marriage more. Married men score much higher on all measures of psychological well-being than unmarried men, whereas single women tend to be more content than married women. Wives are seen as having a duty to keep their husbands interested in sex with them, even though they may no longer ‘fancy’ their husband. However, they have no realistic chance of maintaining his sexual interest because ‘Wives are not sexy. Male sexuality demands the added stimulus of novelty.’

Greer points out that families are now much less stable than they were, with very high divorce rates in Britain. According to Greer, this is largely due to the unhappiness of wives, who are no longer content to accept oppression by their husbands. Three-quarters of divorces are initiated by women.

However, far from being concerned about family instability, Greer sees it as a positive development, because it shows that women are becoming less willing to accept unsatisfactory relationships. She comments:

The truth behind the so-called decline in family values is that the illusion of stable family life was built on the silence of suffering women, who lived on whatever their husbands thought fit to give them, did menial work for a pittance, to buy the necessities that their husbands would not pay for, put up with their husband's drinking and their bit on the side, blamed themselves for their husband's violence towards them, and endured abuse silently because of their children. Greer, 2000

Women as mothers

If women get little fulfilment from being wives, perhaps motherhood offers women better prospects? Greer does not deny that motherhood can be intrinsically satisfying, but she claims that it is not valued by society. She says: ‘Mothers bear children in pain, feed them from their bodies, cherish and nourish and prepare to lose them.’ Children are expected to leave their mother's home when quite young and to owe their mother little or nothing. Many of the elderly who die of hypothermia are mothers, yet their children accept no responsibility for helping or supporting them. Society attaches no value to motherhood. Greer says:

‘Mother’ is not a career option; the woman who gave her all to mothering has to get in shape, find a job, and keep young

and beautiful if she wants to be loved. ‘Motherly’ is a word for people who are frumpish and suffocating, people who wear cotton hose and shoes with a small heel. Greer, 2000

This is reflected in ‘the accepted ideal of feminine beauty’, according to which women are ‘boyishly slim and hipless’ and the ‘broad hips and full bosom of maternity’ are seen as ‘monstrous’. Women are expected to ‘regain their figure’ as quickly as they can after childbirth.

In childbirth, medical attention focuses on the well-being of the baby, while the mother's health takes a back seat. After birth, women find that ‘mothers and babies are not welcome in adult society, in cinemas, theatres, restaurants, shops or buses’. Women are often expected to return to work ‘to service the family debt’, and end up exhausted.

Nevertheless, women who are mothers have a final function to perform: ‘to take the blame’. Both children and society at large blame mothers for what goes wrong in the children's lives. Single mothers are particularly targeted by commentators and politicians as scapegoats for social problems such as crime and unemployment.

Women as daughters

According to Greer, then, family life does little to benefit women in their adult roles as mothers and wives. However, it is also unrewarding for them as daughters.

Greer suggests recent evidence shows that daughters are quite likely to experience sexual abuse from fathers, stepfathers and other adult male relatives. Greer sees this as a particularly horrendous extension of patriarchal relations within families. Men expect to exercise control over women within families and believe women should service their needs. As adults, women become less willing to accept such subservience, but female children become a relatively easy target of exploitation.

Such abuse is ‘very much commoner than we like to believe’ and is not confined to ‘a special group of inadequate individuals’. Instead, it is an extension of male heterosexuality. Greer says: ‘It is understood that heterosexual men fancy young things, that youth itself is a turn-on, but no one is sure how young is too young. Why after all are sexy young women called “babes”?’

Conclusion and evaluation

Given the dismal prospects for women within patriarchal families, Greer argues that the best bet for women is segregation. Women do not need to dissociate themselves from men completely, but they would benefit from living in **matrilocal** households where all the adults are female. Greer says: ‘Such segregated communities may hold great advantages for women and children, especially if they can find a way of incorporating older women who are now the majority of the elderly living alone on benefit.’ The only alternative is for women to continue to accept their ‘humiliation’ by men in conventional families.

Germaine Greer's work is very provocative and makes some important points about the position of women in contemporary society. However, it does make sweeping generalizations, many of which are not backed up by research evidence.

Jennifer Somerville (2000) is very critical of Greer. Somerville argues that Greer underestimates the progress

made by women over recent decades. She also argues that Greer offers little in the way of practical policy proposals that might make a real difference to women's lives and she fails to discuss the effectiveness of policies that have been introduced.

Jennifer Somerville – a liberal feminist perspective on the family

Compared to Greer, Jennifer Somerville (2000) herself offers a more measured critique of the family from a feminist perspective, with more concern for realistic policies which might improve the position of women. Her proposals involve relatively modest reform rather than revolutionary change within society. For these reasons Somerville can be seen as a liberal feminist, although she does not use this term herself.

Somerville argues that many young women do not feel entirely sympathetic to feminism, yet still feel some sense of grievance. To Somerville, many feminists have failed to acknowledge the progress that has been made for women. In particular, women now have much greater freedom to take paid work even if they are married and have young children. They also have much more choice about when or whether they marry or cohabit, become single mothers, enter lesbian relationships, or live on their own.

The increased choice for women, and the tendency for working-class and middle-class families alike to have both partners in employment, have helped to create greater equality within marriage. Somerville argues: 'Some modern men are voluntarily committed to sharing in those routine necessities of family survival, or they can be persuaded, cajoled, guilt-tripped or bullied.' Despite this, however, 'Women are angry, resentful, but above all disappointed in men.' Many men do not take on their full share of responsibilities and often these men can be 'shown the door'.

Somerville raises the possibility that women might do without male partners, especially as so many prove inadequate, and instead get their sense of fulfilment from their children. Unlike Germaine Greer, though, Somerville does not believe that living in households without adult males is the answer. She says, 'the high figures for remarriage suggest that children are not adequate substitutes for adult relationships of intimacy and companionship for most women'. Such a solution fails to 'mention desire – that physical and energizing interest in the Other – which defies being tailored to the logic of equality and common sense'.

From Somerville's viewpoint, heterosexual attraction and the need for adult companionship will mean that heterosexual families will not disappear. However, nor will 'the conflicts endemic to current inequalities in heterosexual unions'. These will lead to more women cohabiting, living in non-family households or on their own; but most will return to 'further renewed attempts at a permanent commitment to partnership, involving ever more complex familial networks of relationships, responsibilities and residences'.

What is therefore needed is a principled pragmatism in which feminists devise policies to encourage greater equality within relationships and to help women cope with the practicalities of family life. One area that

Somerville thinks is particularly important is the introduction of new policies to help working parents. The working hours and the culture of many jobs are incompatible with family life. Many jobs, whether done by men or women, are based on the idea of the male breadwinner who relies upon a non-working wife to take full responsibility for children. This makes equality within marriage difficult to attain and contributes to the tensions which do much harm to many families.

Somerville therefore believes: 'There is a crisis in family life and it does stem from the contradiction between the partial achievement of feminist ideals for women's greater equality and the institutional framework of their lives which assumes their inequality.' If that institutional framework can be changed, for example by increased flexibility in paid employment, then the liberal feminist dream of egalitarian relationships between men and women will move closer to being a reality.

Evaluation

Somerville's arguments are largely based upon a review of other feminist approaches to the family and consequently her study is not backed up by detailed empirical evidence or by specific suggestions for changes in social policies. However, her work does recognize that significant changes have taken place in family life, it suggests ways of making feminism more appealing to the majority of women, and it offers the realistic possibility of gradual progress towards greater equality within the family.

To radical feminists such as Delphy and Leonard and Greer such an approach will fail to deal with the persistence of patriarchal structures and a patriarchal culture in contemporary family life.

Difference feminism

Marxist and radical feminist approaches to the family are not particularly sensitive to variations between families. Both approaches tend to assume that families in general disadvantage women and benefit men (and, in the case of Marxist approaches, benefit capitalism). Both can be criticized for failing to acknowledge the variety of domestic arrangements produced by different groups, and the range of effects that family life can have.

Jennifer Somerville (2000) does take some account of the existence of increased pluralism in the forms of family life. However, some feminists have taken this line of reasoning considerably further and have seen variations in the family situations of women as the defining issue in their theories. Thus, they have argued that women in single-parent families are in a different situation compared to women in two-parent families; women in lesbian families are in a different position to women in heterosexual families; black women are often in a different family position to white women; poor women are in a different position compared to middle-class women, and so on. Feminists who analyse the family in these terms have sometimes been referred to as 'difference feminists'.

Difference feminists have been influenced by a range of feminist theories, including liberal feminism, Marxist feminism and radical feminism (see pp. 101–3). Their work often has affinities with postmodern theories of the family (see pp. 517–18) and with ideas relating to family diversity (see pp. 482–95). However, they share a sufficiently distinctive approach to be considered a separate feminist perspective on the family.

Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh – *The Anti-social Family*

One of the earliest examples of a theory of the family put forward by difference feminists is provided by the work of Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh (1982). Their work was influenced by Marxist feminism but moves beyond the kinds of Marxist feminist views discussed earlier (see p. 466).

Barrett and McIntosh believe that the idea of ‘the family’ is misleading, given the wide variations that exist in life within families and the varieties of household types in which people live. (Family and household diversity is discussed on p. 466.) If there is no one normal or typical family type, then it may be impossible to claim that the family always performs particular functions either for men or for capitalism.

The ‘anti-social’ family

Barrett and McIntosh believe there is a very strong ideology supporting family life. To them, ‘the family’ is ‘anti-social’ not just because it exploits women, and benefits capitalists, but also because the ideology of the family destroys life outside the family. They say, ‘the family ideal makes everything else seem pale and unsatisfactory’. People outside families suffer as a consequence. Family members are so wrapped up in family life that they neglect social contact with others. ‘Couples mix with other couples, finding it difficult to fit single people in.’

Life in other institutions (such as children’s homes, old people’s homes and students’ residences) comes to be seen as shallow and lacking in meaning. Barrett and McIntosh argue that homes for those with disabilities could be far more stimulating if life in institutions were not devalued by the ideology of the family.

Like other feminists, Barrett and McIntosh point out that the image of the family as involving love and mutual care tends to ignore the amount of violent and sexual crime that takes place within a family context. They note that 25 per cent of reported violent crimes consist of assaults by husbands on their wives, and many rapes take place within marriage.

They do not deny that there can be caring relationships within families, but equally they do not think that families are the only places in which such relationships can develop. In their view, the ideology that idealizes family life:

has made the outside world cold and friendless, and made it harder to maintain relationships of security and trust except with kin. Caring, sharing and loving would all be more widespread if the family did not claim them for its own. Barrett and McIntosh, 1982

Linda Nicholson – ‘The myth of the traditional family’

Like Barrett and McIntosh, Linda Nicholson (1997) believes there is a powerful ideology which gives support to a positive image of family life. She argues that this ideology only supports certain types of family while devaluing other types. Nicholson contrasts what she calls the ‘traditional’ family with ‘alternative’ families. She is an American feminist and her comments largely refer to the USA, but they may be applicable more generally to Western societies.

The ‘traditional’ family

Nicholson defines the traditional family as ‘the unit of parents with children who live together’. The bond between husband and wife is seen as particularly important, and the family feels itself to be separate from other kin. This family group is often referred to as the nuclear family (see p. 474). When conservative social commentators express concern about the decline of the family, it is this sort of family they are concerned about. They tend to be less worried about any decline of wider kinship links involving grandparents, aunts, uncles and so on.

Nicholson claims that the nuclear family which is idealized by many commentators is a comparatively recent phenomenon and only became the norm for working-class families in the 1950s, and even then it was uncommon among African Americans. Furthermore, alternative family forms were already developing even before the traditional family reached its zenith. Nicholson says:

Even as a certain ideal of family was coming to define ‘the American way of life’, such trends as a rising divorce rate, increased participation of married women in the labour force, and the growth of female-headed households were making this way of life increasingly atypical. In all cases such trends preceded the 1950s. Nicholson, 1997

Some of these changes actually altered what was perceived as a ‘traditional’ family. For example, it came to be seen as ‘normal’ for married women to work, even if they had small children. Other changes, though, were seen as producing alternative families. Alternatives to traditional families included, ‘Not only gays and lesbians but heterosexuals living alone; married couples with husbands at home caring for children’, as well as stepfamilies, single parents, heterosexual couples living together outside marriage, and gay or lesbian couples with or without children.

The merits of different family types

Alternative families, or alternatives to traditional families, tend to be devalued. They are seen as less worthy than traditional families. However, Nicholson rejects this view. Alternative families are often better than traditional ones for the women who live in them. For example, poor black women in the USA derive some benefits when they live in mother-centred families, often without men. They develop strong support networks with other friends and kin, who act as a kind of social insurance system. They help out the families who are most in need at a particular time if they are in a position to do so.

Such families do have disadvantages. If they have some good fortune and come into money, each family is expected to share resources. This makes it difficult for individual families to escape poverty. Furthermore, the lack of stable heterosexual partnerships means 'children frequently do not have the type of long-term relationships with father figures which is normative within middle-class households'.

Traditional families also have disadvantages:

- Because both partners now tend to work, they have tremendous time pressures, making it difficult to carry out satisfactory and rewarding childcare.
- Children who are the victims of abuse by parents have relatively little opportunity to turn to other relatives for help.
- Traditional families place a heavy burden of expectation on the partners, and, with work and childcare commitments, it may be difficult for them to provide the love and companionship each partner expects.
- The traditional family also precludes and excludes gay and lesbian relationships.

However, traditional families do have some advantages:

- Their small size tends to encourage intimacy between family members, and, when the relationships work, they can be rewarding and long-lasting.
- Traditional families can be economically successful because they are not usually expected to share their resources with others.

Conclusion

The fact that they have some advantages does not mean that traditional families are better than alternative types. From Nicholson's point of view, different types of family suit different women in different circumstances. She believes the distinction between traditional and alternative families should be abandoned. The distinction implies that traditional families are better, when this is often not true. In any case, the idea of the traditional family misleadingly implies that such families have long been the norm, when in fact they have only become popular in recent times, and have never been totally dominant.

By the late 1990s so many people lived in alternatives to traditional families that the idea of the traditional family had become totally outdated. Nicholson therefore concludes that all types of family and household should be acknowledged and accepted because they could suit women in different circumstances. She advocates the celebration of greater choice for people in deciding on their own living arrangements.

Cheshire Calhoun – lesbians as 'family outlaws'

Like Linda Nicholson, Cheshire Calhoun (1997) develops a type of difference feminism influenced by postmodernism. Unlike Nicholson, she focuses on lesbian families rather than looking at the merits of a variety of family forms for women. Calhoun is a postmodern, difference feminist from the United States.

Lesbians and families

Calhoun argues that traditional feminists are right to argue that women are exploited within families, but wrong to argue that the exploitation of women is an inevitable feature of family life. Rather, exploitation results from the heterosexual family.

In lesbian families, there is no possibility that women can become dependent on men and exploited by them. Some lesbian feminists argue that women should avoid forming families, but Calhoun disagrees. According to her, it is not family life itself that leads to the exploitation of women; rather, it is family life within patriarchal, heterosexual marriages that is the problem. Lesbian marriage and mothering can avoid the exploitative relationships typical of heterosexual marriage. Indeed, lesbian partners may be able to develop forms of marriage and family life which can point the way to creating more egalitarian domestic relationships.

This view is in stark contrast to a more conventional view that lesbians and gays cannot develop proper marriages or construct genuine families. According to Calhoun, gays and lesbians have historically been portrayed as 'family outlaws'. Their sexuality has been seen as threatening to the family. They have been portrayed as 'outsiders to the family and as displaying the most virulent forms of family-disrupting behaviour'.

However, Calhoun believes the anxiety among heterosexuals about gays and lesbians has in fact been caused by anxiety about the state of the heterosexual nuclear family. Rather than recognizing and acknowledging the problems with such families, heterosexuals have tried to attribute the problems to corrupting outsiders or outlaws: that is, gays and lesbians.

According to Calhoun, modern family life is essentially characterized by choice. Lesbians and gays introduced the idea of chosen families. You can choose whom to include in your family without the restrictions of blood ties or the expectation of settling down with and marrying an opposite-sex partner. Now, however, heterosexuals also construct 'chosen families' as they divorce, remarry, separate, choose new partners, adopt children, gain stepchildren and so on.

Rather than seeing the above changes in a positive light, many commentators have seen them as a threat to families and the institution of marriage. This time there have been two main types of family outlaw who have been scapegoated and blamed for the changes. These are 'the unwed welfare mother and ... the lesbian or gay whose mere public visibility threatens to undermine family values and destroy the family'.

Conclusion

Calhoun concludes that such scapegoating of lesbians and gays is used to disguise the increasingly frequent departures from the norms of family life by heterosexuals. She says:

Claiming that gay and lesbian families are (or should be) distinctively queer and distinctively deviant helps conceal the deviancy in heterosexual families, and thereby helps to sustain the illusion that heterosexuals are specially entitled to access to a protected private sphere because they, unlike their gay and lesbian counterparts, are supporters of the family. Calhoun, 1997

Thus the ideology of the heterosexual family has played an important part in encouraging discrimination and prejudice against gays and lesbians.

To Calhoun, gay and lesbian relationships, with or without children, are just as much family relationships as those of heterosexual couples. She does not believe that arguing for them to be accepted as such in any way legitimates the heterosexual, patriarchal family that has been so criticized by radical and Marxist feminists.

In the contemporary world, heterosexual families engage in 'multiple deviations from norms governing the family'. A wide variety of behaviours and family forms have become common and widely accepted. Accepting gays and lesbians as forming families involves the acceptance of just one more variation from traditional conventional families. It has the potential benefit of reducing the anti-gay and anti-lesbian prejudice that has been promoted in the name of preserving the family.

Difference feminism – conclusion

The feminists discussed in this section all avoid the mistake of making sweeping generalizations about the effects of family life on women. They tend to be sensitive to the different experiences of family life experienced by women of different sexual orientations, ethnic groups, classes and so on (although each writer does not necessarily discuss all the sources of difference that affect how families influence women's lives). In these respects they can be seen as representing theoretical advances upon some of the Marxist and radical theories discussed earlier.

However, some difference feminists do sometimes lose sight of the inequalities between men and women in families by stressing the range of choices open to people when they are forming families. By stressing the different experiences of women they tend to neglect the common experiences shared by most women in families. Nevertheless, this general approach may be right to suggest that it is possible (if not common) for both men and women to develop rewarding and fulfilling family relationships.

The last few sections have examined the family from a variety of perspectives. The focus now changes to various themes that are significant to our understanding of the family as a unit of social organization. The first theme is the effect of industrialization and modernization on the family.

The family, industrialization and modernization

The pre-industrial family

A major theme in sociological studies of the family is the relationship between the structure of the family and the related processes of industrialization and modernization.

Industrialization refers to the mass production of goods in a factory system which involves some degree of mechanized production technology. **Modernization** refers to the development of social, cultural, economic and political practices and institutions which are thought to be typical of modern societies. Such developments include the replacement of religious belief systems with scientific and rational ones, the growth of bureaucratic institutions, and the replacement of monarchies with representative democracies (see pp. 890–1 for an introduction to the concept of modernity).

Some sociologists regard industrialization as the central process involved in changes in Western societies since the eighteenth century; others attach more importance to broader processes of modernization. However, there are a number of problems that arise from relating the family to industrialization or modernization:

- 1 The processes of industrialization and modernization do not follow the same course in every society.
- 2 Industrialization and modernization are not fixed states but developing processes. Thus the industrial system in nineteenth-century Britain was different in important respects from that of today. Similarly, British culture, society and politics are very different now from how they were two hundred years ago.
- 3 Some writers dispute that we still live in modern industrial societies and believe that we have moved into a phase of postmodernity. The issue of the family and postmodernity will be examined later in the chapter (see pp. 517–19).

Further difficulties arise from the fact that there is not one form of pre-industrial, or premodern, family, but many.

Much of the research on the family, industrialization and modernization has led to considerable confusion because it is not always clear what the family in modern industrial society is being compared to. In addition, within modern industrial society there are variations in family structure. As a starting point, therefore, it is necessary for us to examine the family in premodern, pre-industrial societies in order to establish a standard for comparison.

The family in non-literate societies

In many small-scale, non-literate societies the family and kinship relationships in general are the basic organizing principles of social life. Societies are often divided into a number of kinship groups, such as **lineages**, which are groups descended from a common ancestor. The family is embedded in a web of kinship relationships. Kinship groups are responsible for the production of important goods and services. For example, a lineage may own agricultural land which is worked, and its produce shared, by members of the lineage.

Members of kinship groups are united by a network of mutual rights and obligations. In some cases, if individuals are insulted or injured by someone from outside the group, they have the right to call on the support of members of the group in seeking reparation or revenge.

Many areas of an individual's behaviour are shaped by his or her status as kin. An uncle, for example, may have binding obligations to be involved with aspects of his nephew's socialization and may be responsible for the welfare of his nieces and nephews should their father die.

Something of the importance of family and kinship relationships in many small-scale societies is illustrated by the following statement by a Pomo Indian of northern California:

What is a man? A man is nothing. Without his family he is of less importance than that bug crossing the trail. In the white ways of doing things the family is not so important. The police and soldiers take care of protecting you, the courts give you justice, the post office carries messages for you, the school teaches you. Everything is taken care of, even your children, if you die; but with us the family must do all of that. Quoted in Aginsky, 1968

In this brief description of the family in small-scale, pre-industrial society we have glossed over the wide variations in family and kinship patterns which are found in such societies. Even so, it does serve to highlight some of the more important differences between the family in kinship-based society and the family in industrial society.

The 'classic' extended family

A second form of pre-industrial, premodern family, sometimes known as the classic extended family, is found in some traditional peasant societies. This family type has been made famous by C.M. Arensberg and S.T. Kimball's study of Irish farmers, entitled *Family and Community in Ireland* (1968).

As in kinship-based societies, kinship ties dominate life, but in this case the basic unit is the extended family rather than the wider kinship grouping. The traditional Irish farming family is a **patriarchal extended family**, so-called because of the considerable authority of the male head. It is also **patrilineal** because property is passed down through the male line. Within the family, social and economic roles are welded together, status being ascribed by family membership.

On the farm, the father–son relationship is also that of owner–employee. The father–owner makes the important decisions (such as whether to sell cattle) and directs the activities of all the other members of the extended family. He is head of the family and 'director of the firm'.

Typically, the classic extended family consists of the male head, his wife and children, his ageing parents who have passed on the farm to him, and any unmarried brothers and sisters. Together, they work as a 'production unit', producing the goods necessary for the family's survival.

Some people have argued that, as industrialization and modernization proceed, kinship-based society and the classic extended family tend to break up, and the nuclear family – or some form of modified extended family – emerges as the predominant family form.

Talcott Parsons – the 'isolated nuclear family'

Structural isolation

Talcott Parsons argued that the **isolated nuclear family** is the typical family form in modern industrial society (Parsons, 1959, 1965b; Parsons and Bales, 1955). It is 'structurally isolated' because it does not form an integral

part of a wider system of kinship relationships. Obviously there are social relationships between members of nuclear families and their kin, but these relationships are more a matter of choice than binding obligations.

Parsons saw the emergence of the isolated nuclear family in terms of his theory of social evolution. (This theory is outlined in Chapter 15, pp. 860–1.) The evolution of society involves a process of **structural differentiation**. This simply means that institutions evolve which specialize in fewer functions. As a result, the family and kinship groups no longer perform a wide range of functions. Instead, specialist institutions such as business firms, schools, hospitals, police forces and churches take over many of their functions.

This process of differentiation and specialization involves the 'transfer of a variety of functions from the nuclear family to other structures of the society'. Thus, in modern industrial society, with the transfer of the production of goods to factories, specialized economic institutions became differentiated from the family. The family ceased to be an economic unit of production.

The family and the economy

Functionalist analysis emphasizes the importance of integration and harmony between the various parts of society. An efficient social system requires the parts to fit smoothly rather than abrade. The parts of society are **functionally related** when they contribute to the integration and harmony of the social system.

Parsons argued that there is a functional relationship between the isolated nuclear family and the economic system in industrial society. In particular, the isolated nuclear family is shaped to meet the requirements of the economic system.

A modern industrial system with a specialized division of labour demands considerable geographical mobility from its labour force. Individuals with specialized skills are required to move to places where those skills are in demand. The isolated nuclear family is suited to this need for geographical mobility. It is not tied down by binding obligations to a wide range of kin and, compared to the pre-industrial families described above, it is a small, streamlined unit.

Status in the family

Status in industrial society is **achieved** rather than **ascribed**. An individual's occupational status is not automatically fixed by their ascribed status in the family or kinship group. Parsons argued that the isolated nuclear family is the best form of family structure for a society based on achieved status.

In industrial society, individuals are judged in terms of the status they achieve. Such judgements are based on what Parsons termed **universalistic values** – that is, values that are universally applied to all members of society. However, within the family, status is ascribed and, as such, based on **particularistic values** – that is, values that are applied only to particular individuals. Thus a son's relationship with his father is conducted primarily in terms of their ascribed statuses of father and son. The father's achieved status as a bricklayer, school teacher or

lawyer has relatively little influence on their relationship, since his son does not judge him primarily in terms of universalistic values.

Parsons argued that, in a society based on achieved status, conflict would tend to arise in a family unit larger than the isolated nuclear family. In a three-generation extended family, in which the children remained as part of the family unit, the following situation could produce conflict. If the son became a doctor and the father was a labourer, the particularistic values of family life would give the father a higher status than his son. Yet the universalistic values of society as a whole would award his son higher social status. Conflict could result from this situation, which might undermine the authority of the father and threaten the solidarity of the family.

The same conflict of values could occur if the nuclear family were extended horizontally. Relationships between a woman and her sister might be problematic if they held jobs of widely differing prestige.

The isolated nuclear family largely prevents these problems from arising. There is one main breadwinner, the husband–father. His wife is mainly responsible for raising the children and the latter have yet to achieve their status in the world of work. No member of the family is in a position to threaten the ascribed authority structure by achieving a status outside the family which is higher than the achieved status of the family head.

These problems do not occur in premodern, pre-industrial societies because occupational status is largely ascribed, since an individual's position in the family and kinship group usually determines his or her job.

Parsons concluded that, given the universalistic, achievement-oriented values of industrial society, the isolated nuclear family is the most suitable family structure. Any extension of this basic unit might well create conflict which would threaten the solidarity of the family.

As a consequence of the structural isolation of the nuclear family, the **conjugal bond** – the relationship between husband and wife – is strengthened. Without the support of kin beyond the nuclear family, spouses are increasingly dependent on each other, particularly for emotional support. As we outlined previously, Parsons argued that the stabilization of adult personalities is a major function of the family in modern industrial society. This is largely accomplished in terms of the husband–wife relationship.

Criticism of Parsons

So far, the arguments examined in this section suggest that modernization and industrialization led to a shift from predominantly extended to predominantly nuclear family types. The nuclear family is portrayed by Parsons as being well adapted to the requirements of modern industrial societies. Furthermore, the nuclear family is generally portrayed in a positive light. David Cheal (1991) sees this view as being closely related to the modernist view of progress.

Cheal describes **modernism** as 'a self-conscious commitment to and advocacy of the world-changing potential of modernity'. Writers such as Parsons put forward a modernist interpretation of the family. Cheal strongly attacks Parsons's views.

Parsons saw the change towards a nuclear family as part of the increased specialization of institutions. The family was seen as an increasingly well-adapted specialist institution which interacted with other specialist institutions such as those of the welfare state. Cheal is very sceptical of the modernist view of the family advocated by Parsons. He claims that the faith in progress expressed by writers such as Parsons and Goode ignored contradictions within modernity. Changes in different parts of society did not always go hand-in-hand. For example, increased employment of women in paid jobs did not lead to men sharing domestic tasks equally. From Cheal's point of view, there is nothing inevitable about modern institutions developing in such a way that they function well together. Furthermore, Cheal argues:

Parsons' generalizations about family life were often seriously parochial, reflecting narrow experiences of gender, class, race and nationality. Inevitably, that resulted in Parsons drawing some conclusions that have not stood up well to empirical investigation, or to the passage of time. Cheal, 1991

Peter Laslett – the family in pre-industrial societies

The family in kinship-based society and the classic extended family represent only two possible forms of family structure in pre-industrial society. Historical research in Britain and America suggests neither was typical of those countries in the pre-industrial era.

Peter Laslett, a historian, studied family size and composition in pre-industrial England (Laslett, 1972, 1977). For the period between 1564 and 1821 he found that only about 10 per cent of households contained kin beyond the nuclear family. This percentage is the same as for England in 1966. Evidence from America presents a similar picture.

This surprisingly low figure may be due in part to the fact that people in pre-industrial England and America married relatively late in life and life expectancy was short. On average, there were only a few years between the marriage of a couple and the death of their parents. However, Laslett found no evidence to support the formerly accepted view that the classic extended family was widespread in pre-industrial England. He states: 'There is no sign of the large, extended co-residential family group of the traditional peasant world giving way to the small, nuclear conjugal household of modern industrial society.'

The 'Western family'

Following on from his research in England, Laslett (1983, 1984) began to draw together the results of research into pre-industrial family size in other countries. He reached the conclusion that the nuclear family was not just typical of Britain. He uncovered evidence that there was a distinctive **Western family** found also in northern France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Scandinavia and parts of Italy and Germany. This type of family was typically nuclear in structure: children were born relatively late, there was little age gap between spouses, and a large number of families

contained servants. This contrasted with Eastern Europe and other parts of the world (such as Russia and Japan), where the extended family was more common.

According to Laslett, it was at least possible that the predominance of the nuclear family was a factor that helped Western Europe to be the first area of the world to industrialize. He reversed the more common argument that industrialization led to the nuclear family, claiming that the nuclear family had social, political and economic consequences which in part led to industrialization.

Criticisms of Laslett

Although Laslett successfully exploded the myth that the extended family was typical of pre-industrial Britain, his conclusions should be viewed with some caution.

Michael Anderson (1980) points out some contradictory evidence in Laslett's own research. Laslett's research might have shown average household size to be under five people, but it also revealed that a majority of the population in pre-industrial Britain (53 per cent) lived in households consisting of six or more people.

Anderson also refers to other research which suggests a much greater variety of household types than Laslett's theory of the Western family implies. For instance, research has shown that in Sweden extended families were very common. Furthermore, there is evidence of considerable variation within Britain: the gentry and yeoman farmers, for example, tended to have much larger households than the average.

For these reasons, Anderson is critical of the idea of the 'Western family'. He believes pre-industrial Europe was characterized by family diversity without any one type of family being predominant.

Michael Anderson – household structure and the industrial revolution

Michael Anderson's own research into the effects of industrialization on families does not, however, support the view that during industrialization extended families began to disappear (Anderson, 1971, 1977).

Using data from the 1851 census of Preston, Anderson found that some 23 per cent of households contained kin other than the nuclear family – a large increase over Laslett's figures and those of today. The bulk of this 'co-residence' occurred among the poor. Anderson argues that co-residence occurs when the parties involved receive net gains from the arrangement:

If we are to understand variations and changes in patterns of kinship relationships, the only worthwhile approach is consciously and explicitly to investigate the manifold advantages and disadvantages that any actor can obtain from maintaining one relational pattern rather than another. Anderson, 1971

Extended families and mutual aid

Preston in 1851 was largely dependent on the cotton industry. Life for many working-class families was characterized by severe hardship, resulting from low wages,

periods of high unemployment, large families, a high death rate and overcrowded housing. In these circumstances the maintenance of a large kinship network could be advantageous to all concerned.

In the absence of a welfare state, individuals were largely dependent on kin in times of hardship and need. Ageing parents often lived with their married children, a situation that benefited both parties. It provided support for the aged and allowed both the parents to work in the factory, since the grandparents could care for the dependent children. Networks of mutual support were useful in the event of sickness or unemployment or if children were orphaned. Co-residence also allowed the sharing of the cost of rent and other household expenses.

Anderson's study of Preston indicates that, in the mid-nineteenth century, the working-class family functioned as a mutual aid organization. It provided an insurance policy against hardship and crisis. This function encouraged the extension of kinship bonds beyond the nuclear family. Such links would be retained as long as they provided net gains to those involved. Anderson concludes that the early stages of industrialization increased rather than decreased the extension of the working-class family.

Michael Young and Peter Willmott – four stages of family life

Michael Young and Peter Willmott conducted studies of family life in London from the 1950s to the 1970s. In their book *The Symmetrical Family* (1973) they attempt to trace the development of the family from pre-industrial England to the 1970s. Using a combination of historical research and social surveys, they suggest that the family has gone through four main stages. In this section we will concentrate on their analysis of the working-class family.

Stage 1 – the pre-industrial family

Stage 1 is represented by the pre-industrial family. The family is a unit of production: the husband, wife and unmarried children work as a team, typically in agriculture or textiles. This type of family was gradually supplanted as a result of the industrial revolution. However, it continued well into the nineteenth century and is still represented in a small minority of families today, the best examples being some farming families.

Stage 2 – the early industrial family

The Stage 2 family began with the industrial revolution, developed throughout the nineteenth century and reached its peak in the early years of the twentieth century. The family ceased to be a unit of production, since individual members were employed as wage earners.

Throughout the nineteenth century, working-class poverty was widespread, wages were low and unemployment high. Like Anderson, Young and Willmott argue that the family responded to this situation by extending its network to include relatives beyond the nuclear family. This provided an insurance policy against the insecurity and hardship of poverty.

The extension of the nuclear family was largely conducted by women who 'eventually built up an organi-

zation in their own defence and in defence of their children'. The basic tie was between a mother and her married daughter, and, in comparison, the conjugal bond (the husband–wife relationship) was weak. Women created an 'informal trade union' which largely excluded men. Young and Willmott claim: 'Husbands were often squeezed out of the warmth of the female circle and took to the pub as their defence.'

Compared to later stages, the Stage 2 family was more often headed by a female. However, unlike the situation of New World black families (see p. 861), this resulted more from the high male death rate than from desertion by the husband.

The Stage 2 family began to decline in the early years of the twentieth century, but it is still found in many low income, long-established working-class areas. Its survival is documented in Young and Willmott's famous study entitled *Family and Kinship in East London*. The study was conducted in the mid-1950s in Bethnal Green, a low income borough in London's East End. Bethnal Green is a long-settled, traditional working-class area. Children usually remain in the same locality after marriage. At the time of the research, two out of three married people had parents living within two to three miles.

The study found that there was a close tie between female relatives. Over 50 per cent of the married women in the sample had seen their mother during the previous day, over 80 per cent within the previous week. There was a constant exchange of services such as washing, shopping and babysitting between female relatives. Young and Willmott argued that in many families the households of mother and married daughter were 'to some extent merged'. As such they can be termed extended families, which Young and Willmott define as 'a combination of families who to some degree form one domestic unit'.

Although many aspects of the Stage 2 family were present in Bethnal Green, there were also indications of a transition to Stage 3. For example, fathers were increasingly involved in the rearing of their children. (For details of a later study which examined how Bethnal Green had changed by the 1990s, see pp. 492–4.)

Stage 3 – the symmetrical family

In the early 1970s Young and Willmott conducted a large-scale social survey in which 1,928 people were interviewed in Greater London and the outer metropolitan area. The results formed the basis of their book, *The Symmetrical Family*.

Young and Willmott argue that the Stage 2 family has largely disappeared. For all social classes, but particularly the working class, the Stage 3 family predominates. This family is characterized by 'the separation of the immediate, or nuclear family from the extended family'. The 'trade union' of women is disbanded and the husband returns to the family circle.

Life for the Stage 3 nuclear family is largely home-centred, particularly when the children are young. Free time is spent doing chores and odd jobs around the house, and leisure is mainly 'home-based', for example, watching television. The conjugal bond is strong and relationships between husband and wife are increasingly 'companionate'. In the home, 'They shared their work; they shared

their time.' The nuclear family has become a largely self-contained, self-reliant unit.

Young and Willmott use the term **symmetrical family** to describe the nuclear family of Stage 3. 'Symmetry' refers to an arrangement in which the opposite parts are similar in shape and size. With respect to the symmetrical family, conjugal roles, although not the same – wives still have the main responsibility for raising the children, although husbands help – are similar in terms of the contribution made by each spouse to the running of the household. They share many of the chores, they share decisions, they work together, yet there is still men's work and women's work. Conjugal roles are not interchangeable but they are symmetrical in important respects.

Reasons for the rise of the symmetrical family

Young and Willmott give the following reasons for the transition from Stage 2 to Stage 3 families:

- 1 A number of factors have reduced the need for kinship-based mutual aid groups. They include an increase in the real wages of the male breadwinner, a decrease in unemployment and the male mortality rate, increased employment opportunities for women and the provision of a wider range of services and benefits by the welfare state.
- 2 Increasing geographical mobility has tended to sever kinship ties. In their study of Bethnal Green, Young and Willmott showed how the extended kinship network largely ceased to operate when young couples with children moved some twenty miles away to a new council housing estate.
- 3 The reduction in the number of children, from an average of five or six per family in the nineteenth century to just over two in 1970, provided greater opportunities for wives to work. This in turn led to greater symmetry within the family, since both spouses are more likely to be wage earners and to share financial responsibility for the household.
- 4 As living standards rose, the husband was drawn more closely into the family circle, since the home was a more attractive place with better amenities and a greater range of home entertainments.

Class and family life

Young and Willmott found that the home-centred symmetrical family was more typical of the working class than the middle class. They argue that members of the working class are 'more fully home-centred because they are less fully work-centred'. Partly as compensation for boring and uninvolved work, and partly because relatively little interest and energy are expended at work, manual workers tend to focus their attention on family life. Young and Willmott therefore see the nature of work as a major influence on family life.

The 'Principle of Stratified Diffusion'

In *The Symmetrical Family* Young and Willmott devise a general theory which they term the **Principle of Stratified Diffusion**. They claim this theory explains much of the change in family life in industrial society. Put

simply, the theory states that what the top of the stratification system does today, the bottom will do tomorrow. Lifestyles, patterns of consumption, attitudes and expectations will diffuse from the top of the stratification system downwards.

Young and Willmott argue that industrialization is the 'source of momentum': it provides the opportunities for higher living standards and so on. However, industrialization alone cannot account for the changes in family life: it cannot fully explain, for example, why the mass of the population have chosen to adopt the lifestyle of Stage 3 families. To complete the explanation, Young and Willmott maintain that the Principle of Stratified Diffusion is required.

Industrialization provides the opportunity for a certain degree of choice for the mass of the population. This choice will be largely determined by the behaviour of those at the top of the stratification system. Values, attitudes and expectations permeate down the class system; those at the bottom copy those at the top.

A Stage 4 family?

Applying the Principle of Stratified Diffusion to the future (writing in 1973), Young and Willmott postulated the possible development of a Stage 4 family. They examined in detail the family life of managing directors, which, in terms of their theory, should diffuse downwards in years to come.

Managing directors were work-centred rather than home-centred – 'my business is my life' was a typical quote from those in the sample. Their leisure activities were less home-centred and less likely to involve their wives than those of Stage 3 families. Sport was an important area of recreation, particularly swimming and golf. The wife's role was to look after the children and the home. As such, the managing director's family was more asymmetrical than the Stage 3 family.

Young and Willmott suggest that changes in production technology may provide the opportunity for the Stage 4 family to diffuse throughout the stratification system. As technology reduces routine work, a larger number of people may have more interesting and involving jobs and become increasingly work-centred.

Young and Willmott admit: 'We cannot claim that our 190 managing directors were representative of managing directors generally.' However, given the evidence available, they predict that the asymmetrical Stage 4 family represents the next major development.

Evaluation

A number of features of Young and Willmott's work are open to criticism. Many feminists have attacked the concept of the symmetrical family, arguing that there has been little progress towards equality between husband and wife (see p. 497 for details). There is also little evidence that the Principle of Stratified Diffusion has led to the Stage 4 family becoming typical of all strata. Married women have continued to take paid employment and few working-class families can afford to adopt the lifestyle and family arrangements of managing directors.

Later research by Peter Willmott has not used or supported the concept of the Stage 4 family, as we will see below.

The middle-class family

Quantity and quality of contacts

A major problem in studies of the family is the difficulty of measuring the importance of kin beyond the nuclear family. In a study of middle-class family life carried out in Swansea, Colin Bell (1968) questioned whether the frequency of actual face-to-face contacts between kin provides an accurate assessment. Bell points to the importance of contact by telephone and mail. He also distinguishes between the quantity and quality of contacts. For example, bumping into mum on a street corner in Swansea may have far less significance than a formal visit to her mother by a middle-class daughter.

In his study, Bell found a low level of direct face-to-face contact with kin beyond the nuclear family. Despite this relatively low level of contact, he argues that, compared to the working class, 'Middle-class kin networks may have fewer day-to-day demands but I think that there is little evidence to suggest that they necessarily show any different affective quality.' Thus direct contact may be less frequent but the emotional bonds are the same.

Similar conclusions were reached by Graham Allan (1985) in research conducted in a commuter village in East Anglia. Although he found some evidence that the relationship between working-class wives and their mothers was particularly close, in general there was little difference between the middle-class and working-class kinship networks. In both cases relationships were characterized by a 'positive concern' for the welfare of the kin regardless of the frequency of face-to-face contacts.

Contemporary family networks

Peter Willmott – networks in London

In research conducted during the 1980s in a north London suburb, Peter Willmott (1988) found that contacts with kin remained important in both the middle and working class. In the area he studied, about a third of the couples had moved to the district in the previous five years. Only a third of all the couples had parents or parents-in-law living within ten minutes' travelling distance. However, despite the distance between their homes, two-thirds of the couples saw relatives at least weekly. Working-class couples saw relatives more frequently than middle-class couples, but the differences were not great.

Maintaining contact was relatively easy for most families because so many had access to cars. Most also had homes that were sufficiently spacious for relatives to come and stay. Some 90 per cent had telephones which enabled them to keep in touch with relatives even if they did not meet face-to-face.

Willmott also found that 'relatives continue to be the main source of informal support and care, and that again the class differences are not marked'. For example, nearly 75 per cent had relatives who sometimes helped with babysitting and 80 per cent looked to relatives to help them when they needed to borrow money.

Margaret O'Brien and Deborah Jones – families and kinship in east London

Margaret O'Brien and Deborah Jones (1996) conducted research in Barking and Dagenham, in east London, in the early 1990s. They collected survey data on 600 young people and their parents in this predominantly working-class area. They compared their findings with a 1950s study of the same area conducted by Peter Willmott (1963).

O'Brien and Jones found that, compared with the 1950s, this area had developed a greater variety of types of family and household. Of the young people surveyed, 14 per cent lived with a step-parent and 14 per cent lived in lone-parent families. According to census statistics, over one-third of births in the area took place outside marriage. There were many dual-earner families, with 62 per cent of women in their sample working in paid employment, and 79 per cent of men. In Willmott's 1950s study, family life was much more homogeneous. Then, 78 per cent of people were married and just 1 per cent were divorced. Most single people were young and lived with their parents.

Despite the move towards a greater plurality of family and household types, O'Brien and Jones did not find that there had been any major erosion in the importance attached to kinship. In both Willmott's and O'Brien and Jones's research, over 40 per cent of the sample had grandparents living locally. In the 1990s, 72 per cent of those studied had been visited by a relative in the previous week, and over half the sample saw their maternal grandparent at least weekly. Twenty per cent had a large network of local kin numbering over ten relatives.

O'Brien and Jones conclude that there has been a **pluralization of lifestyles**, an increase in marital breakdowns and a big rise in dual-earner households. However, they also found that 'kin contact and association do not appear to have changed significantly since Willmott's study of the borough in the 1950s'. This suggests a greater continuity in kin relationships, at least among the working class in London, than that implied by some other studies.

Families and kinship in the 1980s and 1990s

All of the above studies are based upon specific geographical areas at a particular point in time. The British Social Attitudes Surveys of 1986 and 1995 contained a number of questions on families and kinship (reported in Jowell *et al.*, 1989, and McGlone *et al.*, 1996). The surveys used large representative samples of the British population. The results of these two surveys were analysed by Francis McGlone, Alison Park and Kate Smith (1998).

Changes in family contacts

McGlone *et al.* (1996) start by noting that a number of important changes that might affect family life took place between 1986 and 1995. These included: a rising proportion of elderly people in the population; increasing levels of divorce, cohabitation, lone parenthood, and births outside marriage; a decline in male unskilled jobs and an increase in female employment; and some young people staying reliant on their families for longer. Despite these

changes, McGlone *et al.* actually found considerable continuity between 1986 and 1995.

The British Social Attitudes Surveys revealed that even in 1995 contacts with relatives remained quite frequent. For example, in 1995, 47 per cent of people without dependent children and 50 per cent of those with dependent children saw their mother at least once a week. Furthermore, 35 per cent of those without children and 45 per cent of those with children saw their father at least once a week. (All figures refer to the proportions of those with living relatives of the type specified.)

The proportions were even higher for those who lived within one hour's drive of their relatives. Among this group, for example, 75 per cent of those without children under 16 saw their mother and 63 per cent saw their father at least once a week. Among those with children, 70 per cent saw their mother and 69 per cent saw their father at least once a week. Telephone contact was also common. Among women with a dependent child, 78 per cent talked to their mother at least once a week, 54 per cent to their father, 45 per cent to an adult sibling, and 39 per cent to another relative.

In line with other studies, it was found that there were significant social class differences. For example, 65 per cent of manual workers but only 39 per cent of non-manual workers with a dependent child saw their mother at least once a week.

Although contacts with relatives remained frequent in 1995, a comparison with 1986 did find that they had declined somewhat. In 1986, 59 per cent of those with dependent children saw their mother at least once a week, declining to 50 per cent in 1995. Contacts with all other relatives had fallen as well. However, the falls were partly accounted for by people living further apart. The fall in contact with mothers was less for those who lived within an hour's driving distance than for the group as a whole. Contacts with fathers remained unchanged and those with adult siblings had increased.

What fall there had been was largely accounted for by non-manual workers, particularly middle-class families where the woman was in full-time paid employment. It appeared that in many dual-earner families there was too little time to maintain regular weekly contact with parents and other relatives. There was no significant change in maternal and paternal contacts among manual workers.

Table 8.1 Proportion with a dependent child who see specified relative living within one hour's journey time at least once a week (1986 and 1995)

	1986		1995	
	%	Base	%	Base
Mother	76	269	70	328
Father	69	196	69	253
Adult sibling	55	300	56	336
Other relative	70	313	64	383

Note: The base for each percentage comprises all those with the specified relative living within one hour's journey time (non-resident) and with dependent children.

Source: F. McGlone, A. Park and K. Smith (1998) *Families and Kinship*, Family Policy Studies Centre, London, p. 17.

As earlier studies suggested, even where there was a lack of contact between family members, that did not necessarily mean that kinship networks had become unimportant.

The British Social Attitudes Surveys of 1986 and 1995 asked people who they would go to for help with things such as doing household and garden jobs, support during illness, and borrowing money. For household jobs and help while ill, most said they would turn first of all to a spouse or partner, while turning to other relatives was the second most popular choice. For borrowing money, the most popular options were borrowing from other relatives or from a bank.

Among those who had received help in the previous five years, a high proportion had got that help from relatives. For example, 59 per cent of those without a child under 16 and 71 per cent of those with a child, who had received a loan or gift of money, had got it from a parent or in-law, and over a third of those who had received help when ill had got it from one of these sources.

McGlone *et al.* conclude that family members remain the most important source of practical help. While people tend to turn first to a spouse or partner, after that they turn to other relatives, with friends or neighbours being less important.

Attitudes to families

Here, McGlone *et al.* found that 'the majority of the adult population are very family centred'. Table 8.2 summarizes the results of the study in this area. It shows that less than 10 per cent thought that friends were more important to them than family members. The vast majority thought that parents should continue to help children after they had left home, and around 70 per cent thought that people should keep in touch with close family members. A

majority thought that you should try to keep in touch with relatives such as aunts, uncles and cousins, even if you did not have much in common with them.

Conclusions

McGlone *et al.* found that families remain very important to people in contemporary Britain. They argue that their study confirms the results of earlier research showing that families remain an important source of help and support, and that family contacts are still maintained even though family members tend to live further apart. Their research suggests that the 'core' of the family does not just include parents and children – in most households grandparents are part of the core as well.

McGlone *et al.* also found that differences between social classes remained significant, with the working class still more likely to have frequent contacts than the middle class. Despite all the social changes affecting families between 1986 and 1995, kinship networks beyond the nuclear family remain important to people.

Survey research on family contacts

More recent research has been carried out for the British Social Attitudes Survey (Park *et al.*, 2001). This research investigated the likelihood of adults seeing family members. The results are summarized in Table 8.3. They show that only 10 per cent of those who had a mother who was still living saw her less than 'several times a year', while 20 per cent saw their father less often than this. Seventy-one per cent saw their brother or sister at least 'several times a year'; and only 4 per cent of those with adult children saw them less frequently.

Government research for the Omnibus Survey (a government survey) found that 61 per cent of grandpar-

Table 8.2 Attitudes towards the family, by whether there is a dependent child

% agreeing	No child under 16		All with child under 16		Ages of child			
	%	Base	%	Base	Under 5		5 to 15	
	%	Base	%	Base	%	Base	%	Base
People should keep in touch with close family members even if they don't have much in common	74	1,407	68	595	66	265	69	330
People should keep in touch with relatives like aunts, uncles and cousins even if they don't have much in common	59	1,414	49	594	42	264	54	330
People should always turn to their family before asking the state for help	54	1,394	42	594	36	264	46	329
I try to stay in touch with all my relatives, not just my close family	50	1,381	43	583	42	259	43	324
I'd rather spend time with my friends than with my family	15	1,370	11	584	9	263	13	321
Once children have left home, they should no longer expect help from their parents	15	1,413	6	596	8	264	4	332
On the whole, my friends are more important to me than members of my family	8	1,393	7	588	8	264	6	324

Source: F. McGlone, A. Park and K. Smith (1998) *Families and Kinship*, Family Policy Studies Centre, London.

Table 8.3 Frequency¹ of adults seeing relatives and friends, 2001 (Great Britain, percentages)

	Mother	Father	Sibling	Adult child	Best friend ²
Daily	8	4	2	12	9
At least several times a week	19	14	10	17	21
At least once a week	24	24	18	22	28
At least once a month	17	16	16	14	18
Several times a year	19	19	25	10	16
Less often	7	11	15	2	4
Never	3	9	7	2	–
All ³	100	100	100	100	100

¹ By people aged 18 and over. Those without the relative and those who live with the relative are excluded.

² Best friend is the respondent's own definition.

³ Includes respondents who did not answer.

Source: *Social Trends 2003*, Office for National Statistics, London, 2003, p. 44.

ents saw their grandchildren at least once a week and a further 17 per cent at least every month. Grandparents also made use of technology to contact their grandchildren: 60 per cent used letter, telephone, fax or e-mail to keep in touch at least once a week, and 12 per cent used one of these methods at least once a month. This research shows that both face-to-face and other contacts between family members remain quite frequent.

The isolated nuclear family?

The evidence we have presented so far under the heading of 'The family, industrialization and modernization' provides a somewhat confusing picture. On the one hand there is Talcott Parsons's isolated nuclear family, and on the other a large body of evidence suggesting that kin beyond the nuclear family play an important part in family life and that the importance of that role may not have been greatly diminishing.

In America, a number of researchers have rejected Parsons's concept of the isolated nuclear family. Sussman and Burchinal (1971), for example, argue that the weight of evidence from a large body of research indicates that the modern American family is far from isolated. They maintain that the family can only be properly understood 'by rejection of the isolated nuclear family concept'.

Parsons replied to his earlier critics in an article entitled 'The normal American family' (1965b). He argued that close relationships with kin outside the nuclear family are in no way inconsistent with the concept of the isolated nuclear family. Parsons stated: 'the very psychological importance for the individual of the nuclear family in which he was born and brought up would make any such conception impossible'.

However, he maintained that the nuclear family is structurally isolated. It is isolated from other parts of the social structure, such as the economic system. For example, it does not form an integral part of the economic system as in the case of the peasant farming family in traditional Ireland.

In addition, the so-called 'extended families' of modern industrial society 'do not form firmly structured units of the social system'. Relationships with kin beyond the nuclear family are not obligatory – they are a matter of individual choice. In this sense, 'extended kin constitute a resource which may be selectively taken advantage of within considerable limits'. Thus, extended families do not form 'firmly structured units' as in the case of the classic extended family or the family in kinship-based societies.

Many recent studies of family life would support Parsons's view that relationships with extended kin, though often maintained, are a matter of choice. However, as we will see later in the chapter, it may be that nuclear families themselves no longer (if they ever did) make up a vital structural unit in contemporary societies. There is evidence that the decision to form a nuclear family is increasingly also a matter of choice (see pp. 514–15).

The dispersed extended family and the beanpole family

A number of attempts have been made to characterize contemporary families in the light of the research which has found that people often continue to maintain contact with extended family members even if they live some distance away.

On the basis of research carried out in London in the 1980s, Peter Willmott (1988) claimed that the **dispersed extended family** is becoming dominant in Britain. It consists of two or more related families who cooperate with each other even though they live some distance apart. Contacts are fairly frequent, taking place on average perhaps once a week, but less frequent than they were among extended families who lived close together. Cars, public transport and telephones make it possible for dispersed extended families to keep in touch. Members of dispersed extended families do not rely on each other on a day-to-day basis.

Willmott sees each nuclear family unit as only partially dependent upon extended kin. Much of the time the nuclear family is fairly self-sufficient, but in times of emergency the existence of extended kin might prove invaluable. Thus Willmott argues that, in modern Britain, 'although kinship is largely chosen, it not only survives but most of the time flourishes'.

The research discussed by McGlone *et al.* (1998) reaches broadly similar conclusions. Kinship networks outside the nuclear family are still important. Indeed, they argue that the core of families with dependent children includes not just the nuclear family but also grandparents. Despite all the social changes that could have weakened kinship, people still value kinship ties and for the most part try to retain them even when they live some distance from their relatives.

Support for this view is provided by Julia Brannen (2003). Drawing on research in which she was involved (Brannen *et al.*, 2000), Brannen argues that there are strong

intergenerational links (links between generations) in contemporary British families. This is partly because people are living longer and therefore there are more families with three or even four generations alive than there were in the past.

Brannen *et al.* (2000) found that grandparents are increasingly providing informal childcare for their grandchildren. In addition, grandparents often give financial help to their children and grandchildren. According to Brannen *et al.*'s research, adults still provide practical or emotional support for elderly parents in many families, and sometimes help them out financially as well.

Although these family links are generally regarded as optional, they are commonplace and play a crucial role in maintaining family cohesion. Brannen (2003) claims that these intergenerational links tend to survive changes in families such as those resulting from divorce. For example, lone parents may rely more on help with childcare from grandparents than parents living with a partner do.

In contrast to the intergenerational links, Brannen *et al.* found that **intragenerational links** (links between those from the same generation, for example siblings and cousins) were somewhat weaker. Brannen therefore characterizes contemporary family structures as being long and thin – she compares them to a beanpole. She concludes:

Many multigenerational families are now long and thin – typically described as beanpole families; they have fewer intragenerational ties because of high divorce rates, falling fertility and smaller family size, but more vertical intergenerational ties because of increased longevity.

Brannen, 2003

Although there are some differences in the way that Willmott, McGlone *et al.* and Brannen *et al.* characterize contemporary British families, they all agree that extended kinship networks remain important.

In this section we have focused on how social changes have affected household composition and kinship networks in Britain. Some of the research has been based upon the assumption that a single family type has been dominant in Britain in different eras. We will now examine whether there is (or ever has been) such a thing as the 'typical family' in Britain.

by a plurality or diversity of household and family types, and that the idea of a typical family is misleading.

The 'cereal packet image' of the family

Ann Oakley (1982) described the image of the typical or 'conventional' family. She says 'conventional families are nuclear families composed of legally married couples, voluntarily choosing the parenthood of one or more (but not too many) children'.

Leach (1967) called this the 'cereal packet image of the family'. The image of the happily married couple with two children is prominent in advertising, and the 'family-sized' packets of cereals and other types of product are aimed at just this type of grouping. It tends also to be taken for granted that this type of family has its material needs met by the male breadwinner, while the wife has a predominantly domestic role.

The monolithic image of the family

The American feminist Barrie Thorne (1992) attacked the image of the 'monolithic family'. She argues: 'Feminists have challenged the ideology of "the monolithic family", which has elevated the nuclear family with a breadwinner husband and a full-time wife and mother as the only legitimate family form.' She believes the focus on the family unit neglects structures of society that lead to variations in families: 'Structures of gender, generation, race and class result in widely varying experiences of family life, which are obscured by the glorification of the nuclear family, motherhood, and the family as a loving refuge.' The idea of 'The Family' involves 'falsifying the actual variety of household forms'. In fact, according to Thorne, 'Households have always varied in composition, even in the 1950s and early 1960s when the ideology of The Family was at its peak.' By the 1990s such an ideology was more obviously inappropriate, since changes in society had resulted in ever more diverse family forms.

Family and household diversity in Britain

The view that such images equate with reality was attacked by Robert and Rhona Rapoport (1982). They drew attention to the fact that in 1978, for example, just 20 per cent of families consisted of married couples with children in which there was a single breadwinner.

In 1989, Rhona Rapoport argued that family diversity was a global trend: a view supported by a study of family life in Europe. At the end of the 1980s the European Co-ordination Centre for Research and Documentation in Social Sciences organized a cross-cultural study of family life in fourteen European nations (Boh, 1989). All European countries had experienced rising divorce rates and many had made it easier to get divorced. Cohabitation appeared to have become more common in most countries, and the birth rate had declined everywhere. Katja Boh argued that, overall, there was a consistent pattern of convergence in diversity. While family life retained considerable variations from country to country, throughout Europe a greater range of family types was being accepted as legitimate and normal.

Family diversity

Introduction

Although some historians such as Michael Anderson (1980) have pointed to a variety of household types in pre-industrial times and during industrialization, it has generally been assumed that a single type of family is dominant in any particular era. Whether the modern family is regarded as nuclear, modified extended, modified elementary or dispersed extended, the assumption has been that this type of family is central to people's experiences in modern industrial societies. However, recent research has suggested that such societies are characterized

As Table 8.4 shows, since the Rapoport's first advanced the idea of family diversity, there has been a steady decline in the proportion of households in Great Britain consisting of married couples with dependent children, from 35 per cent in 1971 to just 22 per cent in 2005. There has been a corresponding increase in single-person households in the same period, with the proportion of households of this type rising from 18 per cent in 1971 to 29 per cent in 2005. Furthermore, the proportion of households that were lone-parent households with dependent children more than doubled, from 3 per cent in 1971 to 7 per cent in 2005. The proportion of all lone-parent households rose from 7 per cent to 10 per cent over the same period. (Lone-parent families are discussed in more detail on pp. 485–80.)

Types of diversity

The fact that the 'conventional family' no longer makes up a majority of households or families is only one aspect of diversity identified by the Rapoport's. They identify five distinct elements of family diversity in Britain:

- 1 There is what they term **organizational diversity**. By this they mean there are variations in family structure, household type, and patterns of kinship network, and differences in the division of labour within the home. For example, there are the differences between conventional families, one-parent families, and **dual-worker families**, in which husband and wife both work.

There are also increasing numbers of reconstituted families. These families are formed after divorce and remarriage. This situation can lead to a variety of family forms. The children from the previous marriages of the new spouses may live together in

the newly reconstituted family, or they may live with the original spouses of the new couple. Although it might be seen to reflect a failure to create a happy family life, some adults in a reconstituted family may find positive aspects of reconstitution.

On the basis of a study conducted in Sheffield, Jacqueline Burgoyne and David Clark (1982) claim some individuals in this situation see themselves as 'pioneers of an alternative lifestyle'. They may choose to remain unmarried to their new partner, and may find advantages in having more than two parental figures in their children's lives. Sometimes they believe stepsiblings gain from living together. Some couples in the Sheffield study felt a considerable sense of achievement from the successful reconstitution of a family. (For further details on divorce, see pp. 504–7.)

- 2 The second type of diversity is **cultural diversity**. There are differences in the lifestyles of families of different ethnic origins and different religious beliefs. There are differences between families of Asian, West Indian and Cypriot origin, not to mention other minority ethnic groups. (We discuss ethnic family diversity in more detail on pp. 488–92.) Differences in lifestyle between Catholic and Protestant families may also be an important element of diversity.
- 3 There are differences between middle-class and working-class families in terms of relationships between adults and the way in which children are socialized (see p. 477).
- 4 There are differences that result from the stage in the life cycle of the family. Newly married couples without children may have a different family life from those with dependent children or those whose children have achieved adult status.

Table 8.4 Households: by type of household and family (Great Britain, percentages)

	1971	1981	1991	2001	2005
One person					
Under state pension age	6	8	11	14	15
Over state pension age	12	14	16	15	14
One-family households					
Couple					
No children	27	26	28	29	29
1–2 dependent children	36	35	30	19	18
3 or more dependent children	9	6	5	4	4
Non-dependent children only	8	8	8	6	6
Lone parent					
Dependent children	3	5	6	7	7
Non-dependent children only	4	4	4	3	3
Two or more unrelated adults	4	5	3	3	3
Multi-family households	1	1	1	1	1
All households (=100%) (millions)	18.6	20.2	22.4	23.8	24.2

- 5 The fifth factor identified by the Rapoport as producing family diversity is **cohort**. This refers to the period during which the family passed through different stages of the family life cycle. Cohort affects the life experiences of the family. For example, those families whose children were due to enter the labour market in the 1980s may be different from other families: the high rates of unemployment during that period may have increased the length of time that those children were dependent on their parents.

Continuing diversification

More recently, Graham Allan and Graham Crow (2001) commented on a continuing trend towards the diversification of family types. They argue that there is now 'far greater diversity in people's domestic arrangements', so that there is no longer a clear 'family cycle' through which most people pass. That is, most people no longer pass through a routine series of stages in family life whereby they leave home, get married, move in with their spouse, and have children who in turn leave home themselves. Instead, each individual follows a more unpredictable family course, complicated by cohabitation, divorce, remarriage, periods living alone and so on.

This diversity is based upon increased choice. Allan and Crow say: 'Individuals and families are now more able to exercise choice and personal volition over domestic and familial arrangements than previously, their options no longer being constrained by social convention and/or economic need.' In part, this is due to 'the increasing separation of sex, marriage and parenthood'. Most people feel they do not have to get married before having sex, and being a parent outside of marriage is increasingly accepted as a legitimate option.

According to Allan and Crow, such is the diversity that

in an important sense there is no such thing as 'the family'. There are many different families; many different family relationships; and consequently many different family forms. Each family develops and changes over time as its personnel develop and change. Allan and Crow, 2001

However, while there is increased choice, Allan and Crow emphasize that families are not egalitarian institutions – some members have more power over changes than others.

Allan and Crow identify the following demographic changes as contributing to increased family diversity:

- 1 The divorce rate has risen. This has affected most countries in the Western world, not just Britain.
- 2 Lone-parent households have increased in number. This is partly due to increased divorce, but also because pregnancy is no longer automatically seen as requiring legitimation through marriage.
- 3 Cohabitation outside marriage is increasingly common. In the early 1960s only one in twenty women lived with their future husband before marriage, but by the late 1980s one in two did so.
- 4 Marriage rates have declined. This is partly because people are, on average, marrying later, but also 'lifetime marriage rates also appear to be falling ... even by middle age, significantly fewer of the generation born in the 1960s and 1970s will have married compared to the cohorts of the 1940s and 1950s'.

- 5 A big increase in the number of stepfamilies also contributes to increased diversity.

Allan and Crow, writing some two decades after the Rapoport originally identified family diversity, believe the trend towards family diversity has continued and strengthened in the intervening period.

We will now examine a number of different aspects of the increasing diversity of family and other intimate relationships.

Gay and lesbian families and the decline of the heteronorm

Differences in sexuality have contributed to increasing diversity according to many sociologists. Gay and lesbian households have become more commonplace – certainly there are more openly gay and lesbian households than there were several decades ago. As Jeffrey Weeks, Catherine Donovan and Brian Heaphey (1999) argue, 'During the past generation the possibilities of living an openly lesbian and gay life have been transformed.' As discussed earlier (see p. 462), many sociologists believe that such households, where they incorporate long-term gay or lesbian relationships, should be seen as constituting families.

According to Weeks *et al.*, homosexuals and lesbians often look upon their households, and even their friendship networks, as being **chosen families**. Some see their relationships as involving a greater degree of choice than those in more conventional heterosexual families. They choose whom to include in their family and negotiate what are often fairly egalitarian relationships.

Some see their families as an alternative type of family which they are consciously developing. Weeks *et al.* argue that this may be part of wider social changes in which 'we culturally prioritize individual choice and the acceptance of diversity. Commitment becomes increasingly a matter of negotiation rather than ascription.' (Their views are similar to those of Anthony Giddens – see pp. 512–14 for details.)

Sasha Roseneil (2005) develops the idea of chosen families further. She uses the term **heteronorm** to refer to the belief that intimate relationships between heterosexual couples are the normal form that intimate relationships take.

Roseneil believes that the heteronorm is increasingly breaking down. She points to television series such as *Friends*, *Seinfeld*, *Ellen* and *Will and Grace* as examples where it is the 'sociability of a group of friends rather than a conventional family, which provides the love, care and support essential to everyday life in the city' (Roseneil, 2005, p. 242).

Roseneil goes on to argue that there is an increasing blurring of the boundaries between intimate sexual relationship and friendship. This is particularly true of lesbian and gay intimacies where 'Friends become lovers, lovers become friends and many have multiple sexual partners of varying degrees of commitment (and none).' Indeed, an individual's 'significant other may not be someone with whom she or he has a sexual relationship' (Roseneil, 2005, p. 244).

The increasing flexibility and diversity of sexual relationships and friendship might be most marked amongst homosexuals, but it is also developing among heterosexuals. Roseneil therefore argues that there is a 'decentering of heterorelations' so that the heterosexual

couple is less central to the social life of individuals, the culture of society and public policies. She says that 'individuals are increasingly being released from heterosexual scripts and the patterns of heterorelativity that accompany them' (Roseneil, 2005, p. 247).

This shift has resulted from social changes such as the rise in divorce, the increase in births outside marriage and heterosexual relationships, the increase in single-person households and the growth of lone parenthood. Roseneil points to the passing of the UK's Civil Partnerships Act of 2004 (which allows civil partnerships between gay and lesbian couples) as a symptom of this change. She concludes that: 'The heterosexual couple, and particularly the married, co-resident heterosexual couple with children, no longer occupies the centre-ground of western societies and cannot be taken for granted as the basic unit of society' (Roseneil, 2005, p. 247).

New reproductive technologies

Unlike gay and lesbian relationships, new reproductive technologies add an entirely new dimension to family diversity. In 1978 the first 'test-tube baby', Louise Brown, was born. The process is called *in vitro* fertilization and involves fertilizing an egg with a sperm in a test-tube, before then implanting it in a woman's womb. The woman may or may not be the woman who produced the egg.

Surrogate motherhood involves one woman carrying a foetus produced by the egg of another woman. This raises questions about who the parents of a child are, and about what constitutes a family. As noted earlier (see pp. 472–3), Calhoun sees this as undermining the centrality of the reproductive couple as the core of the family, and it introduces a greater range of choices into families than was previously available.

John Macionis and Ken Plummer (1997) show how new reproductive technologies can create previously impossible sets of family relationships. They quote the case of Arlette Schweitzer, who in 1991 gave birth in South Dakota in the USA to her own grandchildren. Her daughter was unable to carry a baby and Arlette Schweitzer acted as a surrogate mother. She gave birth to twins, a boy and a girl. Macionis and Plummer ask, 'is Arlette Schweitzer the mother of the twins she bore? Grandmother? Both?' Such examples, they say, 'force us to consider the adequacy of conventional kinship terms'.

They note that such technologies have largely been made available to heterosexual couples of normal child-rearing age, but they have also been used by lesbians, homosexuals, and single and older women. The implication of new reproductive technologies is that biology will no longer restrict the possibilities for forming or enlarging families by having children. They therefore add considerably to the range of potential family types and thus contribute to growing diversity.

Single parenthood

The increase in single parenthood

As mentioned earlier, single-parent families have become increasingly common in Britain. According to government statistics, in 1961, 2 per cent of the population lived

in households consisting of a lone parent with dependent children, but by 2005 this had increased sixfold to 12 per cent (HMSO, 2002a; *Social Trends 2006*). Between 1972 and 2002 the percentage of children living in single-parent families increased from 7 per cent to 23 per cent (*Social Trends 1998, 2006*).

According to European Union figures (Lehemann and Wirtz, 2004), in 2003, lone-parent households with dependent children made up 3 per cent of households in Europe, but 5 per cent of households in Britain. Britain had the second highest proportion of such households in Europe, exceeded only by Sweden with 7 per cent. In Italy, Luxemburg and Spain only 1 per cent of households contained single parents with dependent children.

Although useful, these figures need to be interpreted with caution. They provide only a snapshot picture of the situation at one point in time and do not represent the changing family life of many individuals. Many more children than the above figures seem to suggest spend part of their childhood in a single-parent family, but many fewer spend all of their childhood in one. Children may start their life living in a single-parent family. However, the single parent may well find a new partner and marry or cohabit with them. The child will then end up living with two parents.

The British Household Panel Survey revealed that about 15 per cent of lone mothers stopped being lone parents each year. This was usually because they had established a new relationship (quoted in *Social Trends 1998*).

It should also be noted that many children who live in a single-parent household do see and spend time with their other parent. Furthermore, even in two-parent families, one parent (usually the mother) might be responsible for the vast majority of the childcare. In terms of children's experience, then, the distinction between single-parent and two-parent households is not clear-cut.

The causes of single parenthood – demographic trends

Single parenthood can come about through a number of different routes. People who are married can become single parents through:

- 1 Divorce
- 2 Separation
- 3 Death of a spouse

Lone parents who have never been married:

- may have been living with the parent of the child when the child was born, but they subsequently stopped living together.
- may not have been living with the parent of the child when the child was born.

Official statistics give some indication of the frequency of the different paths to lone parenthood, but do not provide a complete picture.

Figures for Britain based on the General Household Survey of 2005 show that 27 per cent of families with dependent children were lone-parent families. Of these, 24 per cent were headed by lone mothers and just 3 per cent by lone fathers. In 1971 only 1 per cent of households were headed by a never-married lone mother, but by 2005 this had risen to 11 per cent. The proportion of families

headed by a divorced, separated or widowed lone mother rose from 6 per cent to 13 per cent over the same period.

Allan and Crow (2001) note that the increase in lone parenthood is clearly due to two factors: an increase in marital breakdown (particularly divorce), and a rise in births to unmarried mothers. They claim that both these trends 'reflect an acceptance of diversity and individual choice which was far less pronounced in previous eras'. However, as we shall see shortly, there may be limits to the extent to which attitudes have changed.

David Morgan (1994) suggests the rise in lone parenthood could partly be due to changing relationships between men and women. He says important factors causing the rise could include 'the expectations that women and men have of marriage and the growing opportunities for women to develop a life for themselves outside marriage or long-term cohabitations'.

The causes of single parenthood – changing attitudes

The increase in single mothers may partly result from a reduction in the number of 'shotgun weddings' – that is, getting married to legitimate a pregnancy. Mark Brown (1995) suggests that in previous eras it was more common for parents to get married, rather than simply cohabit, if they discovered that the woman was pregnant. Marriages that resulted from pregnancy were often unstable and could end up producing lone motherhood through an eventual divorce or separation. Now, the partners may choose to cohabit rather than marry and, if their relationship breaks up, they end up appearing in the statistics as a single, never-married, parent.

Evidence from the British Social Attitudes Survey gives some indication of changing attitudes towards having children outside marriage and towards lone parenthood in particular. Alison Park *et al.* (2001) analysed data from the British Social Attitudes Survey and found that younger age groups are much more accepting of parenthood outside marriage. For example, in 2000, of those born between 1915 and 1924, 90 per cent agreed that 'people who want children ought to get married'. This compared to just 33 per cent of those born between 1976 and 1982.

The British Social Attitudes Surveys also show a gradual increase in the acceptance of parenthood outside marriage over time. In 1989, 70 per cent agreed that 'people who want children ought to get married', but by 2000 this was down to 54 per cent. By 2000, only 27 per cent agreed that 'Married couples make better parents than unmarried couples'.

However, these figures do not reveal how acceptable people found single parenthood as such, rather than births outside marriage. There is evidence that people continue to disapprove of teenage pregnancy, which is often seen as closely linked to single parenthood. Figures from the British Social Attitudes Survey show that 82 per cent disagree or strongly disagree with the statement 'Teenage pregnancy isn't really that much of a problem in Britain today'. In part, this was because people felt that women on their own would struggle to bring up children. Forty-two per cent agreed or strongly agreed that 'Bringing up a child is simply too hard for a woman of any age to do alone'; 33 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed.

However, respondents were particularly concerned about the ability of teenage single mothers to cope: 83 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that 'Bringing up a child is simply too hard for most teenagers to do alone'. Only 6 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Thus, while the public have become more accepting of children being born outside marital relationships, many remain concerned about lone parenthood, particularly where the parent is a teenager.

Some time before Allan and Crow (2001), the Rapoport (1982) claimed that the lone-parent family was increasingly becoming accepted as one aspect of growing family diversity. They believed it was an important 'emerging form' of the family which was becoming accepted as a legitimate alternative to other family structures.

Other writers, too, have claimed that the stigma attached to lone parenthood has been decreasing. According to David Morgan (1994), the reduction in stigma is reflected in the decreasing use of terms such as 'illegitimate children' and 'unmarried mothers', which seem to imply some deviation from the norms of family life, and their replacement by concepts such as 'single-parent families' and 'lone-parent families', which do not carry such negative connotations. The reduction in the stigma of single parenthood could relate to 'the weakening of religious or community controls over women'.

However, there is little evidence that a large number of single parents see their situation as ideal and actively choose it as an alternative to dual parenthood. Burghes and Brown (1995) conducted research on thirty-one lone mothers and found that only a minority of the pregnancies were planned. None of the mothers had actively set out to become lone mothers and all of them attributed the break-up of their relationship to 'violence in the relationship or the father's unwillingness to settle down'. In this small sample, all aspired to forming a two-parent household, but had failed to achieve it despite their preference.

Lone parents, benefits and the underclass

According to some sociologists the increase in lone parenthood is largely a result of the generosity of welfare payments. Charles Murray's theory of the underclass (discussed on pp. 64–5 and 242–4) is the most influential version of this viewpoint.

A number of politicians have supported this view. According to Mary McIntosh (1996), the former US President Bill Clinton suggested that Murray's explanation for the development of the underclass was basically correct. New Labour politicians in Britain have been less willing to suggest openly that lone motherhood is caused by welfare payments. However, they have developed a 'New Deal' for lone parents which encourages them to find employment rather than relying upon benefits (see pp. 511–12 for a discussion of New Labour policies on families).

However, there are a number of reasons for supposing that the welfare state is not responsible for the increases:

- 1 Some commentators do not believe that lone parenthood gives advantages to those seeking local authority housing. In 1993 John Perry, policy director of the Institute of Housing, said:

I've not been able to find a single housing authority which discriminates in favour of single parents over couples with children. The homeless get priority, but there is no suggestion that a homeless single parent gets priority over a homeless couple. Quoted in the *Independent on Sunday*, 11 July 1993

- 2 As the next section indicates, lone parents who are reliant upon benefits tend to live in poor housing conditions and have low standards of living. There is little material incentive to become a lone parent.
- 3 There is evidence that a large majority of lone parents do not wish to be reliant on state benefits. They would prefer to work for a living but find it impractical to do so. The 1998 British government Green Paper, *Supporting Families*, quoted figures showing that 44 per cent of lone mothers had paid employment, and 85 per cent of the remainder would like to be employed.

Research for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP, 2006) has shown that the New Deal for Lone Parents has raised the proportion of lone parents who are not reliant upon state benefits to about 20 per cent. DWP figures from 2004 (DWP, 2004) showed a rise in the proportion of lone parents in employment from 27 per cent in 1991 to 56 per cent ten years later.

As well as the New Deal for Lone Parents other New Labour policies have contributed to this change. The implementation of a National Childcare Strategy has made childcare more widely available for lone parents who wish to work, and tax credits have made work more financially worthwhile for many (McKnight, 2005).

Allan and Crow (2001) say, 'it is a mistake to assert that lone-parent families, including single-mother ones, are promulgating radically different values to those held by more prosperous families ... in the main lone-parent families do not reject or denigrate a two-parent model'. Indeed, lone parenthood is often a temporary and relatively short-lived family situation. Lone parents may cohabit with a new partner, get married, or be reconciled with their previous partner to form a new two-parent household. Drawing on a number of studies, Allan and Crow estimate that the average length of time spent as a lone-parent family is around five years.

This view is backed up by government research. A longitudinal study carried out for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP, 2004) found that, of those who were lone parents in 1991, a third were living with a new partner in 2001, while a further 17 per cent had had a new partner since 1991 but were lone parents again in 2001.

The consequences of single parenthood

Single parenthood has increasingly become a contentious issue, with some arguing it has become a serious problem for society. For example, in a letter to *The Times* in 1985, Lady Scott said:

A vast majority of the population would still agree, I think, that the normal family is an influence for good in society and that one-parent families are bad news. Since not many single parents can both earn a living and give children the love and care they need, society has to support them; the children suffer through lacking one parent. Quoted in Fletcher, 1988

Similar sentiments have been expressed by British Conservative politicians and, when they were in government, such views began to influence social policies (see pp. 509–10). New Labour politicians have been less inclined to condemn single parenthood outright, but the Labour government's 1998 Green Paper, *Supporting Families*, did say, 'marriage is still the surest foundation for raising children'.

Sociologists such as Charles Murray have even gone so far as to claim that single parenthood has contributed to creating a whole new stratum of society, the underclass – a claim discussed in detail in Chapter 1 (pp. 64–6).

Mary McIntosh (1996) says: 'Over recent years, the media in the United Kingdom have been reflecting a concern about lone mothers that amounts to a moral panic.' She claims that, as a group, lone mothers have been stigmatized and blamed for problems such as youth crime, high taxation to pay for welfare benefits, encouraging a culture of dependency on the state, and producing children who grow up to be unemployable. She says, 'Perhaps the most serious charge is that they are ineffective in bringing up their children.'

However, while most commentators agree that single parenthood can create problems for individual parents, many sociologists do not see it as a social problem, and some believe it is a sign of social progress. As Sarah McLanahan and Karen Booth have said:

Some view the mother-only family as an indicator of social disorganization, signalling the 'demise of the family'. Others regard it as an alternative family form consistent with the emerging economic independence of women. McLanahan and Booth, 1991

Single parenthood and living standards

However single parenthood is viewed, there is little doubt that it tends to be associated with low living standards. The General Household Survey of 2005 found that lone-parent families were disadvantaged in comparison to other British families. In 2005, 41 per cent of lone-parent families had a gross household income of £200 per week or less, compared to 8 per cent of married couples with dependent children and 11 per cent of cohabiting couples with dependent children.

Many of these differences stem from the likelihood of lone-parent families relying upon benefit. According to the Department for Work and Pensions Green Paper on welfare reform (2006), of 1.8 million lone parents, 787,000 were receiving income support.

Lone parents may also receive maintenance payments from the non-resident parent or parents of their children. The Child Support Agency (CSA) was set up in 1993 to pursue non-resident parents for maintenance payments. (In 2006 it was announced that it would be replaced in 2008 with a Child Maintenance and Support Commission.)

However, Allan and Crow (2001) argue that the CSA provides little help to lone parents. By the late 1990s only around 30 per cent of non-resident parents were making any contribution towards their child's maintenance. (CSA Quarterly Summary Statistics from 2003 show that by then around 75 per cent of non-resident parents who were required to pay maintenance were making at least some payment.) Furthermore, the non-resident parents have little incentive to pay if the lone parent is receiving

income support, since the receipt of maintenance payments leads to income support being cut.

Maintenance payments assist lone parents who are employed and earning more than income support levels, but this affects only a minority of lone parents. Lone parents who are employed tend to be on low wages. Most work part-time, and the vast majority are women and as such suffer from 'gendered inequality in the labour market' (Allan and Crow, 2001).

Not all lone-parent families are poor. A few are very affluent, but the majority do suffer from poverty. According to Flaherty *et al.* (2004), in 2001/2 government figures on households below 60 per cent of median earnings showed that 53 per cent of lone-parent families were in poverty, a much higher figure than for any other household type (see Figure 4.5, p. 234).

Other effects

More controversial than the low average living standards of lone parents is the question of the psychological and social effects on children raised in such families. McLanahan and Booth (1991) listed the findings of a number of American studies which seem to indicate that children are harmed by single parenthood. These studies claimed that such children have lower earnings and experience more poverty as adults; that children of mother-only families are more likely to become lone parents themselves; and that they are more likely to become delinquent and engage in drug abuse.

The findings of such studies must be treated with caution. As McLanahan and Booth themselves point out, the differences outlined above stem partly from the low income of lone-parent families and not directly from the absence of the second parent from the household.

In a review of research on lone parenthood, Louie Burghes (1996) notes that some research into the relationship between educational attainment and divorce suggests that children in families where the parents divorce start to do more poorly in education before the divorce takes place. Burghes argues that this implies 'it is the quality of the family relationships, of which the divorce is only a part, that are influential'.

The more sophisticated research into the effects of lone parenthood tries to take account of factors such as social class and low income. These studies find that 'the gap in outcomes between children who have and have not experienced family change narrows. In some cases they disappear; in others, statistically significant differences may remain. Some of these differences are small' (Burghes, 1996).

Some support for this view is provided by research by Sara Arber (2000). Arber found that the children of lone parents did overall suffer more ill-health than other children. However, this difference disappeared for the children of lone parents in employment, who suffered no more ill-health than other groups.

E.E. Cashmore (1985) questioned the assumption that children brought up by one parent are worse off than those brought up by two. Cashmore argues that it is often preferable for a child to live with one caring parent than with one caring and one uncaring parent, particularly if the parents are constantly quarrelling and the marriage has all but broken down.

Cashmore also suggests single parenthood can have attractions for the parent, particularly for mothers, since conventional family life may benefit men more than women. He says:

Given the 'darker side of family life' and the unseen ways in which the nuclear unit serves 'male power' rather than the interests of women, the idea of parents breaking free of marriage and raising children single-handed has its appeals. Cashmore, 1985

It can give women greater independence than they have in other family situations. However, Cashmore does acknowledge that many lone mothers who are freed from dependence on a male partner end up becoming dependent on the state and facing financial hardship. He concludes: 'Lone parents do not need a partner so much as a partner's income.'

David Morgan (1994) believes the evidence does suggest that the children of single parents fare less well than those from two-parent households. He qualifies this by saying, 'we still do not know enough about what causes these differences'. As with the effects of financial hardships, the children could be affected by the stigma attached to coming from a single-parent family. Morgan argues: 'It is possible, for example, that school teachers may be more likely to label a child as difficult if they have the knowledge that a particular child comes from a single-parent household.'

For Morgan, it is very difficult to disentangle the direct and indirect effects on children of being brought up in a single-parent household, and therefore dangerous to make generalizations about such effects.

Ethnicity and family diversity

Ethnicity can be seen as one of the most important sources of family diversity in Britain. Ethnic groups with different cultural backgrounds may introduce family forms that differ significantly from those of the ethnic majority.

British sociologists have paid increasing attention to the family patterns of minority ethnic groups. They have been particularly concerned to establish the extent to which the family relationships typical of the societies of origin of the minority ethnic groups have been modified within the British context. Thus, sociologists have compared minority ethnic families in Britain both with families in the country of their origin and with other British families.

Although some changes in the traditional family life of these groups might be expected, the degree to which they change could provide important evidence in relation to the theory of increasing family diversity. If it is true that cultural diversity is becoming increasingly accepted in Britain, then these families could be expected to change little. If, however, the families of minority ethnic groups are becoming more similar to other British families, then family diversity resulting from ethnic differences might be only temporary.

Statistical evidence

Statistical evidence does suggest there are some differences in the prevalence of different household types in different ethnic groups.

The size of households varies significantly by ethnic group. According to figures from the General Household Survey (2006), amongst the main ethnic groups the smallest household size is found among Black Caribbeans (2.22), followed by whites (2.27), Indians (2.93) and Pakistanis (4.04), with Bangladeshis (4.38) having the largest households. These differences can partly be explained by differences in household and family types.

The Labour Force Survey in autumn 2002 found significant differences in the proportions of different household types in different ethnic groups. Table 8.5 shows that just 9 per cent of Pakistani/Bangladeshi households and 5 per cent of Indian households consisted of lone parents with dependent children, compared to 25 per cent of Black Caribbean and 26 per cent of Black African families. Perhaps surprisingly, there was a lower proportion of lone parents among white households (8 per cent) than among Pakistani/Bangladeshi households.

Among all Asian groups a high proportion of households consisted of couples with dependent children – for example, 57 per cent of Pakistani/Bangladeshi households and 43 per cent of Indian households – compared to 29 per cent of white households and just 22 per cent of Black Caribbean households.

The sample sizes of some minority ethnic groups in the Labour Force Survey are quite small, but other research confirms that there are significant differences between the household and family types of different ethnic groups.

The Policy Studies Institute's *Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities*, conducted in England and Wales in 1994, also found important differences between the families and households of different ethnic groups (Modood *et al.* 1997; see pp. 000–00 for further details of the survey).

Table 8.6 shows the marital status of adults under 60 in different ethnic groups. It shows that whites and Caribbeans had higher rates of divorce and cohabitation than other groups, and that Indians, African Asians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis were the ethnic groups who were most likely to be married.

Using data from previous surveys, Tariq Modood *et al.* were able to calculate the proportions of families with children in different ethnic groups which were headed by lone parents at different points in time. Table 8.7 shows that there had been a substantial increase in lone parenthood in all three ethnic groups, but that the increase had been most noticeable in minority ethnic groups. The rate among South Asian families had risen most quickly, but from a very low base, so that by 1994 they were still by far the least likely group to have formed lone-parent families.

Rates among Caribbean families had also risen rapidly and were probably the highest rates at the time of all three surveys (there were no figures for whites in the 1974 survey). It is significant that very high rates of single parenthood were not present among families of Caribbean origin in 1974. This would suggest that diversity of family types among minority ethnic groups has developed over time. The family types of minority ethnic groups have not remained static and Modood *et al.* conclude that minority ethnic families in Britain changed rapidly between the 1970s and the 1990s. However, as both statistics and qualitative studies suggest, the patterns of ethnic groups do remain somewhat different. There has not been a convergence to a single, typical, British family type, characteristic of all ethnic groups.

We will now examine the significance of variations in family life by ethnic group.

Table 8.5 Proportions of working-age households by household type and ethnic origin of the household reference person,¹ UK, autumn 2002, percentages

Ethnic origin of household reference person	One person	Couple, no children	Couple with dependent children	Lone parent with dependent children	Other	All household types
White ²	20	25	29	8	17	100
Mixed ³	27	15	21	24	13	100
Indian	12	14	43	5	26	100
Pakistani/Bangladeshi	6	8	57	9	19	100
Other Asian	18	*	40	*	27	100
Black Caribbean	31	8	22	25	15	100
Black African	23	7	30	26	14	100
Other Black	30	14	16	30	*	100
Chinese	22	18	23	*	32	100
Other	23	13	36	12	16	100
All ethnic groups	20	24	29	9	18	100

¹ Excludes cases where ethnic origin of head of household is not known.

² Includes British and other white. ³ Includes all mixed origin.

* Sample size too small for estimate.

Table 8.6 Marital status, adults under 60

	Percentages						
	White	Caribbean	Indian	African Asian	Pakistani	Bangladeshi	Chinese
Single	23	41	21	21	19	22	34
Married	60	39	72	72	74	73	62
Living as married	9	10	3	2	3	1	1
Separated/divorced	7	9	3	3	3	1	3
Widowed	1	2	2	1	2	3	–
Weighted count	4,194	1,834	1,539	960	1,053	344	467
Unweighted count	4,187	1,298	1,560	951	1,709	815	271

Note: Analysis based on all individuals in survey households who were neither dependent children nor aged 60 or more.

Source: T. Modood et al. (1997) *Ethnic Minorities in Britain*, PSI, London, p. 24.

Table 8.7 Proportion of families with children which were lone-parent families, 1974–94

	White	Caribbean	South Asian
1974 (household definition)	n.a.	13	1
1982 (household definition)	10	31	5
1994 (household definition)	16	36	5

Source: T. Modood et al. (1997) *Ethnic Minorities in Britain*, PSI, London, p. 40.

South Asian families

Roger Ballard (1982, 1990) examined South Asian families in Britain and compared them to families in South Asia itself. Migration from this area began in the 1950s and was mainly from the Punjab, Gujarat and Bengal. Although there are important differences in family life within these groups, which stem from area of origin, religion and caste, Ballard identifies some features generally held in common.

Families in South Asia are based traditionally around a man, his sons and grandsons, and their respective wives and unmarried daughters. These family groups ideally live and work together in large multi-generational households, sharing both domestic and production tasks. In practice, in the past, many households were not as large as might be expected. A high death rate limited the number of generations living together, and sons might establish different households after their father's death when the family land was divided up.

Changes in South Asian families

Ballard found that some changes had taken place in Asian families in Britain. Women were increasingly working outside the home, and production was less frequently family-based because wage labour provided the most common source of income. Ballard claims married couples in Britain expected more independence from their kin. In some families extended kinship networks were less important than they traditionally are because some of the kin remained in South Asia or lived in distant

parts of Britain. Families were also split into smaller domestic units, partly because British housing was rarely suited to the needs of large groupings.

The strengthening of South Asian families

Despite these changes, Ballard says:

It should not be assumed that such upheavals have either undermined or stood in contradiction to family unity. On the contrary, migration has taken place within the context of familial obligations and has if anything strengthened rather than weakened them. Ballard, 1982

Many migrants found that British culture seemed to attach little value to family honour and placed relatively little emphasis on maintaining kinship ties. As a result, many first-generation immigrants became conservative and cautious in their attitudes to family life. They were vigilant in ensuring that standards of behaviour in the family did not slip and kept a close check on their children.

Ballard found that many children had the experience of two cultures. They behaved in ways that conformed to the culture of the wider society for part of the time, but at home conformed to their ethnic subculture. Although children increasingly expected to have some say in their choice of marriage partners, they generally did not reject the principle of arranged marriages.

The majority of families relied on wage labour, but some of the more successful began to establish family businesses (such as buying a shop), which provided a new focus for the family's economic activities.

Ballard found that, despite the distances involved, most families retained links with their village of origin in South Asia. Extended kinship links could stretch over thousands of miles. He found that money was sometimes sent to help support family members who remained in South Asia.

In Britain, despite the housing problems, close family ties remained. By living close together, or buying adjoining houses and knocking through a connecting door, people were able to retain strong family links.

Ballard concluded that South Asians had suffered comparatively little disruption to family life as a result of settling in Great Britain.

Ghazala Bhatti – Asian children at home

In a more recent ethnographic study, Ghazala Bhatti (1999) carried out research into fifty British Asian families living in a town in southern England. The research was largely based upon in-depth interviews: forty-four of the families were Muslim with Pakistani or Bangladeshi backgrounds, and six were of Indian origin: four were Hindu and two Sikh.

Like Ballard, Bhatti found there was a continuing emphasis on loyalty to the family and on trying to maintain traditional practices related to marriage. For example, most families were keen to maintain links with relatives in India or Pakistan. If they could afford it, they would return 'back home' to the Asian subcontinent to see relatives, on a family trip lasting several weeks. Many families felt some obligation to help out their kin in India or Pakistan financially. Bhatti says that the tradition of *bhai chaara* (literally, brother's help) is taken very seriously.

As in other studies of Asian family life, Bhatti found that *izzat* or family honour was also taken very seriously, with particular emphasis being placed on the behaviour of daughters. Bhatti found that mothers saw their family roles as being of paramount importance. She says: 'Motherhood bestowed status upon these women and they saw child rearing as their most important role and duty in life.' Paid work was seen as much less important than caring for children and others. Fathers, on the other hand, saw their family responsibilities more in terms of a traditional breadwinner role. Bhatti says: 'Asian fathers felt they had to provide for their families. They saw themselves as heads of their households.'

So far, the evidence from Bhatti's research suggests Asian families retained their distinctive emphasis upon traditional family life and family obligations well into the 1990s. But was there any evidence that the younger generation was moving away from this towards patterns prevalent among the white population of Britain?

Bhatti did find some evidence of conflict between different generations. In four of the families studied, 'open clashes had developed between parents and children'. In all these cases, the elder brother had 'decided to marry an English girl instead of somebody of his own kin'. The parents of these children all felt that they had failed as parents and worried about whether their younger children would follow a similar path.

However, Bhatti stresses that these families are 'not the norm'. There were some tensions between the generations in many of the other families, but for the most part these were minor and generally the children seemed happy to adhere to traditional patterns of family life. Bhatti therefore found that the distinctiveness of Asian families was largely continuing and therefore contributing to the family diversity of Britain.

Asian families in the PSI national survey

Data on families collected in the Policy Studies Institute's *Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities* were analysed by Richard Berthoud and Sharon Beishon (1997). They found that British South Asians 'were more likely to marry and marry earlier than their white equivalents. Few of them lived as married and separation and divorce were relatively rare.' Nearly all South Asian mothers were

married and 'a relatively high proportion of South Asian couples, including many with children, lived in the same house as the young man's father'. Nevertheless, there was some evidence that family patterns were changing.

There were some divorces and some single parents in South Asian communities, and another sign of change was a fall in the number of children born to each married couple. The study also found some evidence of changing attitudes to family life, with, for example, young people expecting more say in the choice of marriage partner than their parents had expected.

Families in the West Indies

Research into the family life of West Indians in Britain and in the Caribbean has found greater diversity in their cultural patterns. Jocelyn Barrow (1982) argues that there are three main West Indian family types in the Caribbean:

- 1 The **conventional nuclear family**, or 'Christian marriage', which is often little different from nuclear families in Britain. Families of this type tend to be typical of the more religious or economically successful groups in the population.
- 2 The **common-law family**, which is more frequently found among the less economically successful. An unmarried couple live together and look after children who may or may not be their biological offspring.
- 3 The **mother household**, in which the mother or grandmother of the children is head of the household and, for most of the time at least, the household contains no adult males. This type of household often relies a good deal on the help and support of female kin living nearby to enable the head of the household to fulfil her family responsibilities.

West Indian families in Britain

To a large extent, research has shown that a similar mixture of family types exists among West Indian groups in Britain. Geoffrey Driver (1982), however, found that in some cases what appears to be a nuclear family is rather different beneath the surface. He uses the example of a family called the Campbells. In this family the wife took on primary responsibility both for running the household and for being the breadwinner after her husband lost his job. In reality, then, this was a mother-centred family, even though it contained an adult male.

Barrow (1982) found that mother-centred families in Britain, whether or not they contained an adult male, could rely less on the support of female kin than they could in the West Indies. They were much less likely to live close to the relevant kin, and in some cases appropriate kin were still in the West Indies, and could not therefore be called upon to provide assistance.

However, Barrow discovered that equivalent networks tended to build up in areas with high concentrations of West Indians. Informal help with childcare and other domestic tasks is common among neighbours, and self-help projects such as pre-school playgroups are frequent features of West Indian communities.

Mary Chamberlain (1999) studied the importance of brothers, sisters, uncles and aunts to Caribbean families in

the UK and the Caribbean. She found that siblings often played a significant part in the upbringing of their younger brothers and sisters or of their nephews and nieces. Like Barrow, Chamberlain found that distance from kin made it difficult or even impossible for relatives to play such a significant role in childcare as they played in many families in the Caribbean. Nevertheless, some British African Caribbeans were able to choose to live close to their relatives, and brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles played a greater role in the upbringing of children than is typical in white British families.

Berthoud and Beishon (1997), who analysed the data from the PSI survey, found some distinctive features of black family life in Britain, but also a great deal of variety between families. They say that 'the most striking characteristic is a low emphasis on long-term partnerships, and especially on formal marriage'. British African Caribbean families had high rates of divorce and separation and were more likely than other groups to have children outside of marriage. Among this group there were also high proportions of lone mothers, but African Caribbean lone mothers were much more likely than those from other groups to have paid employment. Nevertheless, over half of Caribbean families with children were married or cohabiting in long-term relationships.

Tracey Reynolds (2002) argues that the concentration on female-headed households among Black Caribbean families in Britain is rather misleading. She emphasizes the diversity and fluidity of Black Caribbean families. In part this reflects cultural diversity within the Black Caribbean community. Family patterns vary between Caribbean islands and these variations are reflected in Britain. For example, in Jamaica, female-headed households are dominant, but in Barbados and Antigua nuclear households are more common.

In Britain (and in the Caribbean) Black Caribbean family diversity is increased by the existence of **visiting relationships**. Even where there is no adult male in the household, the female head of household may still have a male partner, who does not live with her but visits frequently. The visiting man may play a full and active role as a parent.

Sometimes visiting relationships are maintained because they have advantages in terms of claiming social security benefits. However, Reynolds's own research suggests they are often seen as a stepping-stone towards a stable, cohabiting relationship, which might ultimately lead to marriage. Other women, though, valued the independence that a visiting relationship brought and had no desire to cohabit with and marry their partner.

Reynolds concludes that the

tendency in policy research to present Black, female-headed households as the unitary Black family model disguises the fluid and adaptive nature of Black family relationships and living arrangements and also the fact that, similar to families in other racial and ethnic groups, the Black family has diverse family and household patterns. Reynolds, 2002, p. 69

Ethnicity and family diversity – conclusion

The general picture provided by these studies suggests that immigrants and their descendants have adapted their family life to fit British circumstances, but they are still influenced by family patterns in their country of origin.

This would suggest that the presence of a variety of ethnic groups has indeed contributed to the diversity of family types to be found in Britain. These minority ethnic groups have succeeded in retaining many of the culturally distinctive features of their family life.

Nevertheless, there is also evidence of changes taking place in the families of minority ethnic groups, and British culture may have more effect on future generations. Each ethnic group contains a variety of different family types, which are influenced by factors such as class and stage in the life cycle, which relate to diversity in white families. David Morgan warns:

While seeking to recognize ethnic diversity in a multicultural society, ethnic boundaries may be too readily or too easily constructed by, say, white Western analysts. There may be oversimplified references to 'the Chinese family', 'the Muslim family' and so on just as, in the past, there have been oversimplified references to 'the Jewish family'. Morgan, 1996

Minority ethnic families have not just contributed to family diversity through each group having its own distinctive family pattern. They have also contributed to it through developing diverse family patterns within each ethnic group.

Geoff Dench, Kate Gavron and Michael Young – Bethnal Green revisited

The study

Ethnic and other forms of diversity are reflected in a 1990s study carried out by Geoff Dench, Kate Gavron and Michael Young (2006) in the East End of London. They returned to Bethnal Green to see how family life had changed in the area since Young and Willmott had carried out pioneering family research some decades earlier (see pp. 476–7). As part of the study they surveyed 799 residents from all ethnic groups, and a separate sample of 1,021 Bangladeshis, as well as carrying out in-depth interviews. Dench *et al.* comment that:

In the old East End, it was families, and especially mothers and motherhood, which constituted the heart of local community life. Family ties gave people the support and security which made life tolerable, and provided a model for organizing relationships with close neighbours. Being a member of a family gave you kin and quasi-kin locally and made the world a safe place. Dench *et al.*, 2006, p. 103

Some of the older respondents recalled family life in Bethnal Green in the 1950s with fondness. However, Dench *et al.* found that the earlier family patterns had largely disappeared.

The new individualism

Amongst the white population, only a few families remained which had strong kinship networks in the local area. These families tended to be based around family businesses where different family members worked together and local contacts were important for maintaining business. The businesses were usually handed down the male line, but women were important in maintaining family ties and ties with the local community.

These families apart, family life in Bethnal Green in the 1990s was characterized by much greater fluidity and variety than had been the case in the 1950s. For example, the survey found that 21 per cent of the sample were living in single-person households. Of these, 52 per cent were single, 30 per cent widowed, 14 per cent divorced or separated and 4 per cent married. A further 9 per cent lived in households which consisted of unrelated adults.

Dench *et al.* argue that a new individualism had developed. In part this had been an unintended consequence of developments in the welfare state. In the early post-war years, state welfare reform based upon the Beveridge Report (see pp. 262–3) had tried to supplement the welfare provided by families and communities. By the 1960s, however, state welfare placed an increased emphasis on the citizenship rights of individuals. This resulted in the welfare state taking over many of the support roles for individuals which had previously been provided by families. There was a 'bureaucratisation of caring' (Dench *et al.*, 2006, p. 105). This change allowed individuals to be more independent of families, which in turn led to women having more freedom to take paid work.

The new individualism is reflected in changes in families and households.

Many people are now living in very casual, fluid households, or in more than one place, or in unconventional relationships. On top of this, the rise of ... single parenthood ... means that many are engaged in undisclosed cohabitation which they simply do not discuss ... for fear of losing benefits. Dench *et al.*, 2006, p. 109

Family life is much more varied than in the 1950s. Cohabitation, divorce, separation and single parenthood are all more common. Individual families take a wide variety of forms. For example, in one family where the parents were separated, they still spent time together and the woman spent a lot of time with her estranged husband's relatives.

Although some of the changes had benefited women, they were still usually the ones left caring for children. At the same time, male detachment from family concerns was becoming more common. More men were living apart from their children and although some played a full and active part in their children's lives, others did not.

The slide back towards conventionality

Despite all these changes, Dench *et al.* did not find widespread rejection of marriage among the white population. Some single mothers had escaped from unsatisfactory relationships and were not keen to find another partner immediately, but most young women still saw marriage as the ideal. Most cohabitants saw cohabitation as a step on the road to marriage. There was little evidence that single mothers who were reliant upon state benefits were happy with their situation – most were hoping to get off benefits as soon as possible.

Despite all the changes, then, Dench *et al.* detected a 'slide back towards conventionality' (2006, p. 115). Not only did people still value conventional marriage, but most disapproved of gay couples and there was a widespread feeling that family patterns had moved too far from traditional patterns. Many people believed that casual and fluid relationships were acceptable before children were

born, but once you became a parent more stable households were preferable. The middle-class residents who had moved into the area seeking affordable housing were particularly likely to believe that the additional responsibilities of parenthood were best addressed in stable relationships.

For the white residents of Bethnal Green, then,

life for most people still seems to follow broadly the same path as it always has, that is from childhood, through a period of independence, on to parenthood and the interdependence between adults characteristic of married life. What has changed is ... that many (middle-class) now wait longer before becoming parents. Dench *et al.*, 2006, p.116

Once women became parents they felt more constrained and they lost some of their sense of having the freedom to choose whatever life they wished, especially as women still had primary responsibility for childcare.

Bangladeshi families

According to Dench *et al.*, the new individualism that had affected white family life had had little discernible impact on Bangladeshi family life. Out of the sample of over 1,000 Bangladeshis, only four lived in single-person households. These consisted of one single woman, one single man, a man with a wife in Bangladesh and one divorced man.

The reason why so few Bangladeshis live alone, according to Dench *et al.*, is that divorce and separation rates are very low in the Bangladeshi community, widows tend to live with their children, and the elderly are still usually cared for by their children.

Furthermore, couple households were very uncommon: only two of the Bangladeshi households consisted of a married couple with no children. On the other hand, extended families were common: 61 per cent of the sample consisted of a married couple with their children, and 25.7 per cent were extended family households. In most cases extended families developed because young couples decided to live with the husband's parents.

The Bangladeshi households were large, with an average size of nearly six. Dench *et al.* found that Bangladeshis' families were close-knit and supportive. Many of the Bangladeshis interviewed were critical of white families for failing to support vulnerable family members such as elderly parents. Dench *et al.* say that most Bangladeshis 'still believe in the moral solidarity of the family and the importance of putting family interests before those of the individual' (2006, pp. 84–5).

Bangladeshi men have a religious obligation to marry and be involved in family life. Men also feel a strong obligation towards their mother, and, by marrying, a son can get domestic help for his mother from his wife. It is also considered part of a son's duty towards his mother to have children to continue the family line. Some Bangladeshi women, however, are not happy with having to take on responsibility for their mother-in-law, and some therefore prefer to marry a man from Bangladesh in the hope that his mother will not come and settle with them.

Dench *et al.* challenge the view that Bangladeshi families are male-dominated or patriarchal. A man's role is to serve his family through paid work, not to dominate it. In the Bangladeshi community the family is seen as the centre of power and is more important than the public world of

work. Bangladeshi wives are less likely to work than their white counterparts, but that does not mean that they lack power. Dench *et al.* comment: 'Far from conforming to the notion of the compliant "little women", in our study Bangladeshi mothers – certainly those in the senior generation – emerge in the domestic context as decidedly matriarchal, in firm control of their families' (2006, p. 86).

Conclusion

The study by Dench *et al.* clearly shows that in the four decades since Young and Willmott's previous study, there had been enormous changes in the family life of Bethnal Green. Little remained of the extended family networks typical amongst the white population of the 1950s. The strongest family networks were amongst the Bangladeshi community, but they had distinct family patterns of their own which added to the overall diversity. In the white population, the new individualism undermined traditional patterns of family life. However, marriage and family were still valued, particularly by those who had children, and Dench *et al.* detected a move back towards valuing conventional family life amongst some residents.

Robert Chester – the British neo-conventional family

The conclusions of Dench *et al.* suggest that it might be too simple to argue that British family life is characterized by diversity and that conventional family life is no longer valued. In an early attack upon the idea that fundamental changes are taking place in British family life, Robert Chester (1985) argued that the changes had been only minor. He claimed the evidence advanced by advocates of the theory of family diversity was misleading, and the basic features of family life had remained largely unchanged for the vast majority of the British population since the Second World War. He argued:

Most adults still marry and have children. Most children are reared by their natural parents. Most people live in a household headed by a married couple. Most marriages continue until parted by death. No great change seems currently in prospect. Chester, 1985

Percentage of people versus percentage of households

Chester believed that a snapshot of household types at a particular time does not provide a valid picture of the British family.

The first point that Chester made is that a very different picture is produced if the percentage of people in various types of household is calculated, instead of the percentage of households of various types. Households with parents and children contain a greater percentage of the population than the percentage of households they make up. This is because family households tend to have more members than other types of household.

Chester's arguments were based upon figures from 1981. As Table 8.8 shows, the way the figures are calculated does make a difference. In 1981, 40 per cent of households were made up of two parents and children, but over 59 per cent of people lived in such households. In 2005, 27 per cent of households consisted of two parents plus children, but 44 per cent of people lived in this type of household. Despite the changes, just under half the population were still living in nuclear, two-generation households, with a further 26 per cent living in couple households.

The nuclear family and the life cycle

The second point made by Chester was that life cycles make it inevitable that at any one time some people will not be a member of a nuclear family household. Many of those who lived in other types of household would either have experienced living in a nuclear family in the past, or would do so in the future. He said: 'The 8 per cent living alone are mostly the elderly widowed, or else younger people who are likely to marry.' He described the parents-and-children household as 'one which is normal and is still experienced by the vast majority'.

The 'neo-conventional family'

According to Chester, there was little evidence that people were choosing to live on a long-term basis in alternatives to the nuclear family. However, he did accept that some changes were taking place in family life. In particular, many families were no longer 'conventional' in the sense that the

Table 8.8 Households and people in households in Great Britain, 1981 and 2005

Type of household	1981		2005	
	Households (%)	People (%)	Households (%)	People (%)
One person	22	8	31	14
Married or cohabiting couple	26	20	29	26
Married or cohabiting couple with dependent children	32	49	21	36
Married or cohabiting couple with non-dependent children	8	10	6	8
Lone parent with dependent children	4	5	7	8
Other	9	8	6	8

Source: Social Trends (1982) HMSO, London, and General Household Survey, 2005 (2006) Office for National Statistics, London.

husband was the sole breadwinner. He accepted that women were increasingly making a contribution to household finances by taking paid employment outside the home.

However, Chester argued that, although, according to his figures, 58 per cent of wives worked, often they only did so for part of their married lives, and frequently on a part-time basis. Many gave up work for the period when their children were young; a minority of married mothers (49 per cent) were employed; and only 14 per cent of working married mothers had full-time jobs. Chester argued: 'The pattern is of married women withdrawing from the labour force to become mothers, and some of them taking (mostly part-time) work as their children mature.'

Although Chester recognized this was an important change in family life compared to the past, he did not see it as a fundamental alteration in the family. He called this new family form – in which wives have some involvement in the labour market – the **neo-conventional family**. It was little different from the conventional family apart from the increasing numbers of wives working for at least part of their married lives.

Family diversity – conclusion

While Chester makes an important point in stressing that nuclear families remained very common and featured in most people's lives, he perhaps overstated his case. As Table 8.8 shows, there has been a continuing reduction in the proportion of people living in parents-and-children households, from 59 per cent in 1981 to 44 per cent in 2005. The percentages of people living alone or in lone-parent households have increased. Thus, since Chester was writing, there has been a slow but steady drift away from living in nuclear families in Britain.

In 1999 Elizabeth Silva and Carol Smart summed up the situation by arguing that fairly traditional family forms remain important. They note:

In 1996, 73 per cent of households were composed of heterosexual couples (with just under 90 per cent of these being married), 50 per cent of these households had children, and 40 per cent had dependent children ... only 9 per cent of households with dependent children were headed by lone parents. Silva and Smart, 1999

Nevertheless, they argue, 'personal choices appear as increasingly autonomous and fluid'.

Jennifer Somerville (2000) believes the decline of the traditional family can be exaggerated. She notes that the argument that traditional families have declined is often based on a comparison with figures from 1971. However, this is misleading because the 1960s were an untypical decade in which women 'had a greater propensity to marry than in previous generations and married at the earliest age ever recorded since civil registration began in 1837'. In succeeding decades, women went back to a pattern of marrying and having children later in life.

Furthermore, echoing the arguments of Chester, she points out that most of the figures are based upon snapshots of how many are married with children at a particular time, rather than a life-cycle approach which looks at how many marry and have children at any point in their lives. Somerville claims that only about 5 per cent of people never marry at some stage in their lives.

However, she recognizes there are 'considerable discontinuities with the past'. These include the 'separation of sex from reproduction', so that pre-marital sex is now the norm and cohabitation outside or before marriage is increasingly common. Childlessness is becoming more common, and there are many more working mothers and much more divorce than several decades ago. Lone parenthood is also more common, though it is often transitory, with most lone parents finding a new partner (or their children reaching adulthood) within a few years of becoming lone parents.

Somerville also accepts that minority ethnic groups add to the diversity of British family life. She therefore identifies a broader range of changes that increase diversity in family life than Chester. Nevertheless, she reaches the conclusion that 'changes should be seen in the context of continuing commitment by the vast majority of the population to a framework of belief in the value of family life and to behaviour which seeks to approximate to that ideal'.

This analysis is rather more balanced than that advanced by the Rapoport, who in 1982 first put forward the idea that there was a new era of choice and diversity in British family life. They argued that it was increasingly acceptable to form alternative households and families to conventional nuclear ones. They said:

Families in Britain today are in a transition from coping in a society in which there was a single overriding norm of what family life should be like to a society in which a plurality of norms are recognized as legitimate, indeed, desirable. Rapoport and Rapoport, 1982

The statistical evidence indicates increasing diversity and several sociologists have tried to link ideas of choice and diversity with their particular views on modernity and postmodernity. (These views will be examined on pp. 512–19.) However, sociologists such as Chester and Somerville believe most people continue to aspire to a conventional family life.

Having surveyed the ways in which the structure of the family may have changed over the years, we will now investigate whether the functions of the family have also changed.

The changing functions of the family

The loss of functions

Some sociologists argue that the family has lost a number of its functions in modern industrial society. Institutions such as businesses, political parties, schools and welfare organizations now specialize in functions formerly performed by the family. Talcott Parsons argued that the family has become:

on the 'macroscopic' levels, almost completely functionless. It does not itself, except here and there, engage in much economic production; it is not a significant unit in the political power system; it is not a major direct agency of integration of the larger society. Its individual members participate in all these functions, but they do so as individuals, not in their roles as family members. Parsons, 1955

However, this does not mean that the family is declining in importance – it has simply become more specialized. Parsons maintained that its role is still vital. By structuring the personalities of the young and stabilizing the personalities of adults, the family provides its members with the psychological training and support necessary to meet the requirements of the social system. Parsons concluded: 'the family is more specialized than before, but not in any general sense less important, because society is dependent more exclusively on it for the performance of certain of its vital functions'. Thus the loss of certain functions by the family has made its remaining functions more important.

The maintenance and improvement of functions

Not all sociologists would agree, however, that the family has lost many of its functions in modern industrial society. Ronald Fletcher, a British sociologist and a staunch supporter of the family, maintained that just the opposite has happened. In *The Family and Marriage in Britain* (1966) Fletcher argued that not only has the family retained its functions but also those functions have 'increased in detail and importance'. Specialized institutions such as schools and hospitals have added to and improved the family's functions, rather than superseded them.

- 1 Fletcher maintained that the family's responsibility for socializing the young is as important as it ever was. State education has added to, rather than removed, this responsibility, since 'Parents are expected to do their best to guide, encourage and support their children in their educational and occupational choices and careers.'
- 2 In the same way, the state has not removed the family's responsibility for the physical welfare of its members. Fletcher argued: 'The family is still centrally concerned with maintaining the health of its members, but it is now aided by wider provisions which have been added to the family's situation since pre-industrial times.'

Rather than removing this function from the family, the state provision of health services has served to expand and improve it. Compared to the past, parents are preoccupied with their children's health. State health and welfare provision has provided additional support for the family and made its members more aware of the importance of health and hygiene in the home.

- 3 Even though Fletcher admitted that the family has largely lost its function as a unit of production, he argued it still maintains a vital economic function as a unit of consumption. Particularly in the case of the modern home-centred family, money is spent on, and in the name of, the family rather than the

individual. Thus the modern family demands fitted carpets, three-piece suites, washing machines, television sets and 'family' cars.

Young and Willmott (1973) make a similar point with respect to their symmetrical Stage 3 family (see p. 477). They argue: 'In its capacity as a consumer the family has also made a crucial alliance with technology.' Industry needs both a market for its goods and a motivated workforce. The symmetrical family provides both. Workers are motivated to work by their desire for consumer durables. This desire stems from the high value they place on the family and a privatized lifestyle in the family home. This provides a ready market for the products of industry.

In this way the family performs an important economic function and is functionally related to the economic system. In Young and Willmott's words, 'The family and technology have achieved a mutual adaptation.'

Feminism and economic functions

Feminist writers have tended to disagree with the view shared by many sociologists of the family that the family has lost its economic role as a unit of production and has become simply a unit of consumption. They tend to argue that much of the work that takes place in the family is productive but it is not recognized as such because it is unpaid and it is usually done by women. The contribution to economic life made by women is frequently underestimated.

The radical feminists Christine Delphy and Diana Leonard (1992) accept that industrialization created new units of production such as factories, but deny that it removed the productive function from the family. Some productive functions have been lost, but others are performed to a much higher standard than in the past. They cite as examples 'warm and tidy rooms with attention to décor, and more complex meals with a variety of forms of cooking'.

The family has taken on some new productive functions, such as giving pre-school reading tuition to children, and functions such as washing clothes and freezing food have been reintroduced to the household with the advent of new consumer products.

Delphy and Leonard also point out that there are still a fair number of families which continue to act as an economic unit producing goods for the market. French farming families, which have been studied by Christine Delphy, are a case in point. (Delphy and Leonard's work is discussed in more detail on pp. 467–8; and housework is discussed on pp. 497–9.)

Summary and conclusions

Most sociologists who adopt a functionalist perspective argue that the family has lost several of its functions in modern industrial society, but they maintain that the importance of the family has not declined. Rather, the family has adapted and is adapting to a developing industrial society. It remains a vital and basic institution in society.

Others dispute the claim that some of these functions have been lost, or argue that new functions have replaced the old ones. From all these viewpoints the family remains a key institution.

All the writers examined here have a tendency to think in terms of 'the family' without differentiating between different types of family. They may not, therefore, appreciate the range of effects family life can have or the range of functions it may perform.

Graham Allan and Graham Crow (2001) argue that attempts to identify the functions of the family can be criticized because of the 'excessively abstract and over-general nature of functionalist frameworks of analysis which, by treating family forms as things shaped by external forces, allowed little scope for individual agency or variations from the norm'. Postmodernists and difference feminists certainly reject the view that there is any single type of family which always performs certain functions. (See pp. 517–19 for a discussion of postmodernism and pp. 470–2 for a discussion of difference feminism.)

The writers discussed above also tend to assume that families reproduce the existing social structure, whether this is seen as a functioning mechanism, an exploitative capitalist system, or a patriarchal society. Yet families are not necessarily supportive of, or instrumental in reproducing, existing societies. With increasing family diversity, some individual families and even some types of family may be radical forces in society. For example, gay and lesbian families sometimes see themselves as challenging the inegalitarian relationships in heterosexual families (see p. 462 for a discussion of gay and lesbian families).

In this section we have discussed the various functional roles that the family performs; in the next section we focus on roles within the family.

withdrawal of the wife from her relationships with female kin, and the drawing of the husband into the family circle. We looked at the reasons they gave for this in a previous section (see pp. 477–8). The extent to which conjugal roles have been changing and what this indicates about inequalities between men and women have been the subject of some controversy. These controversies will now be discussed.

Inequality within marriage

Although much of the recent research on conjugal roles has been concerned with determining the degree of inequality between husband and wife within marriage, there has been no generally accepted way of determining the extent of inequality. Different researchers have measured different aspects of inequality. Some have concentrated on the division of labour in the home: they have examined the allocation of responsibility for domestic work between husband and wife and the amount of time spent by spouses on particular tasks. Others have tried to measure the distribution of power within marriage.

Young and Willmott are among those who have argued that conjugal roles are increasingly becoming joint. However, many sociologists who have carried out research in this area have found little evidence that inequality within marriage has been significantly reduced.

Conjugal roles, housework and childcare

The symmetrical family

Young and Willmott's views on the symmetrical family (see above) have been heavily criticized. Ann Oakley (1974) argues that their claim of increasing symmetry within marriage is based on inadequate methodology. Although their figure of 72 per cent (for men doing housework) sounds impressive, she points out that it is based on only one question in Young and Willmott's interview schedule: 'Do you/does your husband help at least once a week with any household jobs like washing up, making beds (helping with the children), ironing, cooking or cleaning?' Oakley notes that men who make only a very small contribution to housework would be included in the 72 per cent. She says: 'A man who helps with the children once a week would be included in this percentage, so would (presumably) a man who ironed his own trousers on a Saturday afternoon.'

Housework and childcare

A rather different picture of conjugal roles emerged in Oakley's own research (1974). She collected information on forty married women who had one child or more under the age of 5, who were British or Irish born, and aged between 20 and 30. Half of her sample were working-class, half were middle-class, and all lived in the London area.

She found greater equality in terms of the allocation of domestic tasks between spouses in the middle class than in

Conjugal roles

A major characteristic of the **symmetrical family** – which Young and Willmott (1973) claimed was developing when they were writing in the 1970s – was the degree to which spouses shared domestic, work and leisure activities. Relationships of this type are known as **joint conjugal** roles, as opposed to **segregated conjugal** roles.

In Young and Willmott's Stage 2 family, conjugal roles – the marital roles of husband and wife – were largely segregated. There was a clear-cut division of labour between the spouses in the household, and the husband was relatively uninvolved with domestic chores and raising the children. This segregation of conjugal roles extended to leisure. The wife associated mainly with her female kin and neighbours; the husband with his male workmates, kin and neighbours. This pattern was typical of the traditional working-class community of Bethnal Green.

In the Stage 3 symmetrical family, conjugal roles become more joint. Although the wife still has primary responsibility for housework and child rearing, husbands become more involved, often washing clothes, ironing and sharing other domestic duties. Husband and wife increasingly share responsibility for decisions that affect the family. They discuss matters such as household finances and their children's education to a greater degree than the Stage 2 family.

Young and Willmott argue that the change from segregated to joint conjugal roles results mainly from the

the working class. However, in both classes few men had high levels of participation in housework and childcare: few marriages could be defined as egalitarian. In only 15 per cent of marriages did men have high levels of participation in housework; for childcare the figure was 30 per cent.

Since these pioneering pieces of research, more sophisticated methods have been developed for examining the domestic division of labour.

Survey research

Survey research has used large samples to produce more reliable data. The British Social Attitudes Survey conducted research on household tasks in 1984, 1991 and 1997. It detected a trend towards men undertaking an increasing proportion of domestic tasks, but the change has been slow and women still do most of the domestic work.

The 1997 British Social Attitudes Survey also included comparative data from Europe, but only included data on a restricted range of household tasks (Jowell *et al.*, 1998) (see Table 8.9). It showed a small reduction in the gendered nature of washing and ironing in Britain (it was a mainly female task in 84 per cent of households in 1991, while the equivalent figure for 1997 was 79 per cent). There was also a small reduction in the tendency for men to be responsible for making repairs around the house (although the precise wording of the relevant question changed between surveys). Washing and ironing were less female-dominated in Britain than in other countries, but in Sweden looking after sick family members was considerably less likely than it was in Britain to be a mainly female activity.

Childcare

Mary Boulton (1983) argues that studies which focus upon the allocation of tasks in the home exaggerate the extent of men's involvement in childcare, and she denies that questions about who does what give a true picture of conjugal roles. To her, childcare:

is essentially about exercising responsibility for another person who is not fully responsible for herself and it entails seeing to all aspects of the child's security and well-being, her growth and development at any and all times. Boulton, 1983

Boulton claims that, although men might help with particular tasks, it is their wives who retain primary

responsibility for children. It is the wives who relegate non-domestic aspects of their lives to a low priority.

Some empirical support for Boulton is provided by a study conducted by Elsa Ferri and Kate Smith (1996). They produced data based upon the National Child Development Survey. This survey followed, as far as possible, the lives of everybody born in Great Britain in a specific week in 1958. The data came from the 1991 survey when those involved were 33 years old. By that time, the sample included 2,800 fathers and 3,192 mothers.

The survey found it was still very unusual for fathers to take primary responsibility for childcare. For example, according to the male respondents, in dual-earner families where both worked full-time the father was the main carer in only 2 per cent of families, the wife was the main carer in 24 per cent of families, and childcare was shared equally in 72 per cent of families. When mothers were asked the same question they said that they were the main carer in 32 per cent of families and men in just 1 per cent.

Even when the woman had paid employment outside the home and the man did not, it was still more common for the woman than the man to take main responsibility for routine childcare or childcare in the event of illness. This suggests that the increasing employment of married women outside the home had made comparatively little impact on the contribution of the male partner to childcare.

The study also found little evidence for the development of egalitarian gender roles in relation to other types of housework. Ferri and Smith say, 'Thus, for example, two-thirds of full-time working mothers said they were responsible for cooking and cleaning, and four out of five for laundry.'

Time

Another way to study gender roles is to examine time spent on different tasks. This gives some indication of whether, in total, men or women spend more time on paid and unpaid work.

Jonathan Gershuny (1992, 1999) examined how social changes have affected the burden of work for British husbands and wives. Perhaps the most important change affecting this area of social life has been the rise in the proportion of wives taking paid employment outside the home. Sociologists such as Oakley have argued that women have increasingly been taking on a dual burden: they have retained primary responsibility

Table 8.9 Household division of labour, 1997

% saying always or usually the woman:	Western Germany	Britain	Irish Republic	Netherlands	Sweden*
Washing and ironing	88	79	85	87	80
Looking after sick family member	50	48	50	47	38
% saying always or usually the man:					
Makes small repairs around the house	80	75	69	78	82
Base (households with partners only)	1,604	601	607	1,255	883

* For Sweden the base varies for the different tasks and this is the smallest unweighted base.

for household tasks while also being expected to have paid employment.

Gershuny examined 1974 and 1975 data from the BBC Audience Research Department, and 1997 data from an Economic and Social Research Council project, to discover how the share of work had changed (Gershuny, 1999, discussed in Laurie and Gershuny, 2000). In 1997 women continued to do in excess of 60 per cent of the domestic work even when both partners were working full-time. However, Gershuny did find a gradual shift towards husbands doing a higher proportion of domestic work. Overall, he found little difference in the amount of time men and women in employment spent on paid and unpaid work.

However, Graham Allan (1985) suggests the work that women carry out in the home may be tedious and less satisfying than the more creative tasks that are frequently done by men. He says: 'much female domestic work is monotonous and mundane, providing few intrinsic satisfactions'.

Recent survey research suggests that, overall, there is little difference between men and women in the time spent on paid and unpaid work. In 2000–1 and 2005 (ONS, 2001; Lader *et al.*, 2006) the British government conducted detailed time-use surveys which involved collecting data using questionnaires and self-completed time diaries in a sample of over 5,000 homes.

In the 2000 survey, men spent a total of 6 hours 20 minutes per day on employment and study, housework and childcare, compared to 6 hours 26 minutes per day spent by women. In 2005, men spent 5 hours 41 minutes on these activities, compared to 5 hours 58 minutes spent by women (see Table 8.10). Therefore, the gap between men and women had widened from six minutes to seventeen minutes.

Furthermore, in 2005 men had a total of 5 hours 25 minutes' leisure a day, compared to women's 4 hours 53 minutes. However, these figures include all men and women, not just those who cohabit with a partner of the opposite sex. Lader *et al.* found that 'Men and women in partnerships have similar totals of work and leisure time, with men overall having a little more work time than women' (2006, p. 23). Much of the overall difference could be explained by the fact that women who were not in a partnership were much more likely than single men to be lone parents, and single women also tended to spend longer working than single men.

Conjugal roles and power

Another approach to studying conjugal roles is to examine power within marriage. This has usually been attempted through an examination of who makes the decisions.

A study by Irene Hardill, Anne Green, Anna Dudlestone and David Owen (1997) examined power in dual-earner households in Nottingham using semi-structured interviews. The households were classified into those where the husband's career took precedence in making major household decisions (such as what part of the country to live in), those where the wife's career took precedence, and those where neither career clearly took precedence over the other. In nineteen households the man's career came first, in five the woman's career took precedence, and in six neither career was clearly priori-

Table 8.10 Time spent on main activities by sex, in Great Britain, 2005 (people aged 16 and over)

	Hours and minutes per day	
	Males	Females
Sleep	8.04	8.18
Resting	0.43	0.48
Personal care	0.40	0.48
Eating and drinking	1.25	1.19
Leisure		
Watching TV/DVD and listening to radio/music	2.50	2.25
Social life and entertainment/culture	1.22	1.32
Hobbies and games	0.37	0.23
Sport	0.13	0.07
Reading	0.23	0.26
<i>All leisure</i>	5.25	4.53
Employment and study	3.45	2.26
Housework	1.41	3.00
Childcare	0.15	0.32
Voluntary work and meetings	0.15	0.20
Travel	1.32	1.22
Other	0.13	0.15

Source: *Time Use Survey 2005*, <http://statistics.gov.uk?CCI?nugget.asp?ID=7&Pos=1&ColRank=2&Rank=352>

tized. It was most likely to be the man who decided where the couple were to live, and men tended to make decisions about cars. However, husband and wife usually made a joint decision about buying or renting a house.

Although men dominated in most households, this was not the case in a significant minority of households where there appeared to be more egalitarian relationships.

Power can also be examined in terms of the control of money. Jan Pahl (1989, 1993) was the first British sociologist to conduct detailed studies of how couples manage their money. Her study was based upon interviews with 102 couples with at least one child under 16. The sample, although small, was fairly representative of the population as a whole in terms of employment, class, housing and ownership of consumer goods. However, the very rich were under-represented.

The study found four main patterns of money management:

1 Husband-controlled pooling was the most common pattern (thirty-nine couples). In this system, money was shared but the husband had the dominant role in deciding how it was spent. This system was often found in high-income households, especially if the wife did not work. It was also common if the woman worked part-time or if she had a lower-status job than her husband. This system tended to give men most power.

- 2 Wife-controlled pooling** was the second most common category, involving twenty-seven couples. In this system, money was shared but the wife had the dominant role in deciding how it was spent. This group tended to be middle-income couples, especially where the wife was working and had a better-paid job than her husband or was better educated. This tended to be the most egalitarian system of financial control.
- 3 Husband control** was found in twenty-two couples. Among these couples the husband was usually the one with the main or only wage, and often he gave his wife housekeeping money. Some of these families were too poor to have a bank account; in others only the husband had an account. Sometimes the women worked, but their earnings largely went on housekeeping. In some systems of husband control, the husband gave his wife a housekeeping allowance out of which she had to pay for all or most of the routine costs of running the household. This system tended to lead to male dominance.
- 4 Wife control** was the least frequent pattern, found in just fourteen couples. This was most common in working-class and low income households. In a number of these households neither partner worked and both received their income from benefits. In most of these households neither partner had a bank account and they used cash to pay any bills. Although this system appeared to give women more power than men, it was most common in poorer households where the responsibility for managing the money was more of a burden than a privilege.

Inequality and money management

According to Pahl, the most egalitarian type of control is wife-controlled pooling. In households with this system the male and female partners tend to have similar amounts of power in terms of decision making, and they are equally likely (or unlikely) to experience financial deprivation. They also tend to have similar amounts of money to spend on themselves.

Wife-controlled systems appear to give women an advantage over men. However, they tend to be found in households where money is tight and there is little, if anything, left over after paying for necessities. Often women will go short themselves (for example, by eating less, delaying buying new clothes and spending little on their leisure) rather than see their husband or children go short.

Husband-controlled systems tend to give husbands more power than their wives. In these households men usually spend more on personal consumption than wives.

Where husband-controlled pooling occurs, men tend to have more power than women, but the inequality is not as great as in systems of husband control. In the highest-income households there is usually sufficient money to meet the personal expenditure of both partners.

Overall, then, Pahl found that just over a quarter of the couples had a system (wife-controlled pooling) associated with a fair degree of equality between the partners. This would suggest that in domestic relationships, as in a number of other areas, women have not yet come close to reaching a position of equality.

More recent research by Laurie and Gershuny (2000)

analysed data from the British Household Panel Survey from 1991 and 1995. This showed movement away from the housekeeping allowance system (in which the man gives the woman an allowance to pay for household expenses), which was being used by just 10 per cent of households by 1995.

The use of shared management systems had increased marginally to 51 per cent in 1995. However, there was more evidence of change towards greater equality in terms of major financial decisions. In 1991, 25 per cent of couples said the male partner had the final say on big financial decisions, but by 1995 this had declined to 20 per cent. The proportion saying the male and female partners had an equal say had risen from 65 per cent to 70 per cent over the same period. Greater equality was particularly in evidence where the women were well qualified and had high earnings, especially if they were employed in professional or managerial jobs.

Overall, Laurie and Gershuny concluded that while there was some evidence of a movement towards greater equality, 'we are still far from a position in which the balance between the sexes in the workplace, corresponds to the balance of work, and economic power, in the home'.

Conjugal roles and emotion work

Jean Duncombe and Dennis Marsden – emotion work

Drawing on the work of various sociologists, Jean Duncombe and Dennis Marsden (1995) argue that some forms of domestic work cannot be measured in conventional surveys. In particular, alongside such tasks as housework and childcare members of households also carry out **emotion work**.

The term 'emotion work' was first used by Arlie Hochschild (1983) to describe the sort of work done by female airline cabin crew in trying to keep passengers happy. Duncombe and Marsden also try to develop the work of N. James (1989), who discussed how 'from a very early age girls and then women become subconsciously trained to be more emotionally skilled in recognizing and empathizing with the moods of others'.

Hochschild and James were mainly interested in emotion work in paid employment. Duncombe and Marsden examine the implications of their ideas for relationships between heterosexual partners.

Their research was based on interviews with forty white couples who had been married for fifteen years. They asked the couples, separately and together, how their marriage had survived for so long in an age of high divorce rates. They found that many women expressed dissatisfaction with their partner's emotional input into the relationship and the family. Many of the women felt emotionally lonely. A number of the men concentrated on their paid employment, were unwilling to express feelings of love for their partner, and were reluctant to discuss their feelings. Most of the men did not believe there was a problem. They did not acknowledge that emotion work needed to be done to make the relationship work.

Duncombe and Marsden found that many of the women in the study were holding the relationship

together by doing the crucial emotion work. In the early stages of the relationship, the partners, but particularly the women, **deep act** away any doubts about their emotional closeness or suitability as partners. At this stage any doubts are suppressed because they feel in love and are convinced of the worth of the relationship.

Later, however, 'with growing suspicions, they "shallow act"' to maintain the 'picture for their partner and the outside world'. **Shallow acting** involves pretending to their partners and others that the relationship is satisfactory and they are happy with it. They 'live the family myth' or 'play the couple game' to maintain the illusion of a happy family. This places a considerable emotional strain on the woman, but it is the price to pay for keeping the family together. However, eventually some women begin to 'leak' their unhappiness to outsiders. In the end this may result in the break-up of the relationship and separation or divorce.

In the meantime, women's greater participation in emotion work can be 'a major dimension of gender inequality in couple relationships'. With married women increasingly having paid employment, they can end up performing a **triple shift**. Having completed their paid employment they not only have to come home and do most of the housework, they also have to do most of the emotion work as well.

As women have gained paid employment this type of inequality has not reduced. Progress in this area would require even more fundamental changes. Duncombe and Marsden say:

In fact if we consider what would be a desirable future, the most important change would be for boys and men to become meaningfully involved in the emotional aspects of family life and childcare from an early age. And this would require not only a massive reorganization of work and childcare but also a deep transformation in the nature of heterosexual masculinity. Duncombe and Marsden, 1995

Gillian Dunne – the division of labour in lesbian households

In an interesting departure from studies of conjugal roles in heterosexual households, Gillian Dunne (1999) conducted a study of the division of labour in lesbian households. She examined thirty-seven cohabiting lesbian couples who took part in in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

Dunne found that 'A high level of flexibility and even-handedness characterized the allocation of employment responsibilities in partnerships.' A number of the couples were responsible for the care of at least one child, making it difficult for both to work full-time. However, unlike most heterosexual couples, one of the partners did not usually take primary responsibility for childcare. The birth mother of the child was not necessarily the main carer, and the partners often took turns to reduce their paid employment to spend more time with the children.

The women were also asked to keep time-budget diaries. These revealed that in most households there was a fairly equitable division of time spent on household tasks. In 81 per cent of households neither partner did more than 60 per cent of the housework. Where the division of tasks was more skewed towards one partner than the other, it was usually the case that the one who did less housework spent much longer in paid employment.

Many of the women felt that their sameness as women and the lack of different gender roles made it easier to share tasks equitably. One of the women said, 'I suppose because our relationship doesn't fit into a social norm, there are no pre-set indications about how our relationship should work. We have to work it out for ourselves.'

Dunne concludes that the boundaries between masculinity and femininity and the hierarchical nature of gender relationships, with men being dominant, help to produce conventional domestic divisions of labour in heterosexual households. The best way to change this is to give greater value to 'feminine' tasks such as childcare and housework.

Many middle-class women have avoided the consequences of men's lack of involvement in housework by employing other women to help with domestic tasks. Their career opportunities have been gained at the expense of low-paid, exploited, working-class cleaners, nannies, childminders, etc. To Dunne, this is not an acceptable solution, since it helps to perpetuate the exploitation of women in what she sees as a patriarchal society. Dunne says:

We have a common interest in dissolving gender as a category of both content and consequence. This involves acting upon our recognition that gender has a social origin, is possessed by men as well as women and can thus be transcended by both. In practical terms, this means recognizing and celebrating the value of women's traditional areas of work rather than accepting a masculine and capitalist hierarchy of value which can lead to women passing on their responsibilities to less powerful women. Dunne, 1999

Inequality within marriage – conclusion

Dunne's study of lesbian households suggests equitable domestic divisions of labour can be achieved. However, it is not easy to achieve them in the context of a culture that still differentiates quite clearly between masculinity and femininity.

Most of the evidence suggests women are still a long way from achieving equality within marriage in contemporary Britain. They are still primarily responsible for domestic tasks and they have less power than their husbands within marriage. In terms of the amount of hours spent 'working', though, the general picture of inequality seems to be less clear-cut. Husbands of wives with full-time jobs do seem to be taking over some of the burden of housework, although the change is slow and some inequality remains.

Marriage, marital breakdown and family decline

Many social and political commentators in Western societies have expressed concern about what they see as the decline of marriage and of family life. Many see this as

a threat to the family, which in turn they see as the bedrock of a stable and civilized society.

For example, Brenda Almond (2006) believes that the family is fragmenting. She argues that there has been a shift away from concern with the family as a biological institution based upon the rearing of children, towards the family as an institution which emphasizes 'two people's emotional need or desire for one another' (Almond, 2006, p. 107).

There is an increased emphasis on the needs of individuals and less emphasis on society's need for the rearing of children in stable relationships. There is increasing social and legal acceptance of marital breakdown, cohabitation, gay and lesbian relationships and so on, all of which lead to the decline and fragmentation of families. Almond believes that the decline of the family is damaging to society, and steps should be taken to reverse the trend.

Another writer who believes that the family and marriage are in decline is Patricia Morgan (2003). She argues that factors such as increased cohabitation, declining fertility, the decline in the proportion of married people, the increase in single parenthood and childbirth outside marriage, and the rise in the numbers living alone are all indicative of this decline. Like Almond, she sees this as harmful for society, for individuals and for children. For example, cohabiting couples are much more likely to split up than married couples, causing, according to Morgan, problems for children and for a society which may have to provide financial support for the resulting lone-parent family.

In addition, cohabitation, divorce and the delaying of marriage until later in life all contribute to the low fertility rate. This leads to an ageing of the population, which places a massive burden on those of working age who need to support the growing proportion of elderly in the population.

The threats to marriage and family life fall into two main categories: threats resulting from alternatives to marriage and conventional families; and threats resulting from the breakdown of marriages.

On the surface, the evidence for a crisis in the institution of marriage and in family life seems compelling. However, as we will see, the evidence needs to be interpreted carefully and the crisis may not be as acute as it first seems.

'Threats' from alternatives to marriage

First, it is argued that marriage is becoming less popular – decreasing numbers of people are getting married. More people are developing alternatives to conventional married life. These alternatives can take a number of forms.

Marriage rates

Writing in the 1980s, Robert Chester (1985) was among those who noted that marriage rates among young adults had declined in many Western countries. First, Sweden and Denmark experienced falling marriage rates among the under-thirties. The trend continued in Britain, the USA and West Germany in the early 1970s, and later spread to France.

In England and Wales the first-marriage rate (number of marriages per 1,000 single people) was 74.9 in 1961,

rising to 82.3 in 1971, but by 2004 it was just 24.7 (*Population Trends*, 2006). Amongst women the rate was 83 in 1961, 97 in 1971 and 30.8 in 2004. As Figure 8.1 shows, the number of first marriages fell from a peak of nearly 400,000 per year in the mid-1960s to well under 200,000 per year by 2003.

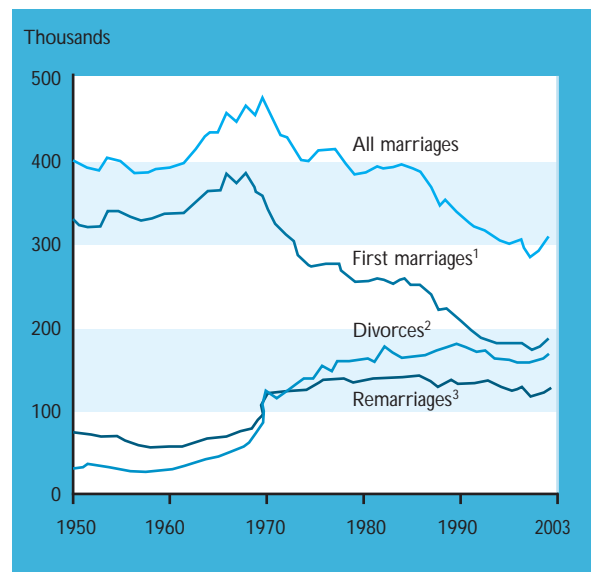
However, Chester did not see these sorts of figures as conclusive evidence for a decline in the popularity of marriage. He said, 'Mainly we seem to be witnessing a delay in the timing of marriage, rather than a fall-off in getting married at all.' He thought future generations might marry less frequently, but he believed there would be only a small (if any) reduction in marriage rates.

Chester was certainly right about the delay in marriage since much of the decline in first marriages does seem to be due to people delaying marriages. According to British government statistics, in 1961 the average age at first marriage in the UK was 25.6 years for men, and 23.1 years for women. In 2004 the average age at first marriage was considerably older: 31.4 years for men and 29.1 years for women (*Population Trends*, 2005). Some commentators are keen to point out that most people do get married at some stage in their lives. According to Jon Bernardes:

It is important to realize that around 90 per cent of all women marry in the UK today compared to 70 per cent in the Victorian era. Britain has one of the highest rates of marriage in the European Union. By the age of 40 years, 95 per cent of women and 91 per cent of men have married. Bernardes, 1997

Recent figures suggest continued reductions in the proportion who have never married. The Government Actuary's Department (2005) calculated that in 2003 89 per cent of 45- to 64-year-old men and 93 per cent of

Figure 8.1 Marriages and divorces in the UK, 1950–2003



¹ For both partners

² Includes annulments. Data for 1950 to 1970 for Great Britain only

³ For one or both partners

women had married at least once. However, they predicted that the lower rates of marriages in younger age groups would lead to an increase in the never-married. They projected that by 2031 amongst the 45–64 age group only 66 per cent of men and 71 per cent of women would have been married at least once.

Whether these projections prove accurate remains to be seen, but if the proportion of the never-married amongst older age groups does rise this much, it would suggest more than a simple delay in the timing of marriage.

Cohabitation

One alternative to marriage is cohabitation by couples not legally married. According to *Social Trends 2006*, between 1986 and 2004/5 the proportion of non-married adults aged under 60 who were cohabiting rose from 11 per cent to 24 per cent amongst men, and from 13 per cent to 25 per cent amongst women. Amongst cohabiting men, 23 per cent were single, 12 per cent were widowed, 36 per cent were divorced and 23 per cent were separated. Amongst women the proportions were 27 per cent single, 6 per cent widowed, 29 per cent divorced and 23 per cent separated.

Whilst there is no doubt that cohabitation has become increasingly common, there is no agreement about the significance of this trend.

Patricia Morgan (2003) sees it as part of a worrying trend in which marriage is going out of fashion and the family is in serious decline. Morgan believes that cohabitation used to be seen primarily as a prelude to marriage but increasingly it is part of a pattern which simply reflects an 'increase in sexual partners and partner change' (2003, p. 127). She quotes statistics from the British Household Panel Survey showing that less than 4 per cent of cohabiting couples stay together for more than ten years as cohabitants, although around 60 per cent get married.

A different view is taken by Joan Chandler (1993). She sees the increase in cohabitation as rather more significant: 'The time couples spend cohabiting is lengthening and increasingly they appear to be choosing cohabitation as a long-term alternative to marriage.' Chandler suggests this is reflected in the increasing proportion of children born out of marriage – partners no longer feel as much pressure to marry to legitimize a pregnancy. She argues:

Many of today's parents have detached childbearing and rearing from traditional marriage and 28 per cent of children are now born to unmarried mothers. However, many fewer are born to residentially lone parents, as 70 per cent of these children are jointly registered by parents who usually share the same address. Chandler, 1993

Although Chandler sees cohabitation as increasingly popular, she does point out that it is nothing new. Unofficial self-marriage (where people simply declare themselves to be married – sometimes called 'living over the brush') was very common in past centuries. She quotes research which estimates that as many as a quarter to a third of couples lived in consensual unions in Britain in the eighteenth century.

Changing public attitudes to cohabitation were discussed by Anne Barlow, Simon Duncan, Grace James

and Alison Park (2001). Using data from a number of British Social Attitude Surveys, Barlow *et al.* found clear evidence of changing public attitudes. More people were beginning to see it as acceptable to have children without getting married. In 1994, 70 per cent agreed that 'People who want children ought to get married', but by 2000 this was down to 54 per cent.

They found increasingly liberal attitudes to pre-marital sex, with the proportion thinking that it was 'not wrong at all' increasing from 42 per cent in 1984 to 62 per cent in 2000. By 2000 more than two-thirds of respondents (67 per cent) agreed it was 'all right for a couple to live together without intending to get married', and 56 per cent thought it was 'a good idea for a couple who intend to get married to live together first'.

Barlow *et al.* also found clear evidence that younger age groups were more likely to find cohabitation acceptable than older age groups, but all age groups had moved some way towards greater acceptance of pre-marital sex and cohabitation. Barlow *et al.* argue: 'Over time ... there is a strong likelihood that society will become more liberal still on these matters, although particular groups, such as the religious, are likely to remain more traditional than the rest.'

However, they do not suggest that this indicates the breakdown of marriage as a respected institution. In the 2000 survey, 59 per cent agreed that 'marriage is still the best kind of relationship'. A mere 9 per cent agreed that 'there is no point getting married – it is only a piece of paper', while 73 per cent disagreed.

Despite the increasing acceptance of cohabitation, Barlow *et al.* therefore argue that, 'overall, marriage is still widely valued as an ideal, but that it is regarded with much more ambivalence when it comes to everyday partnering and (especially) parenting'.

Many people showed considerable commitment to their relationships even if they were not married. On average, current cohabitants had been together for six and a half years. For some, extended cohabitation was a prelude to marriage. Barlow *et al.* therefore argue that many people still value long-term, stable heterosexual relationships. While many see marriage as preferable to cohabitation, cohabitation is increasingly accepted as a valid alternative.

Barlow *et al.* suggest Britain will 'probably move towards a Scandinavian pattern, therefore, where long-term cohabitation is widely seen as quite normal, and where marriage is more of a lifestyle choice than an expected part of life'.

Declining fertility and birth rates

Patricia Morgan (2003) points out that total fertility rates (the number of children born per woman of childbearing age) have fallen. In the 1870s, around five children were born per woman, but this declined to below two in the 1930s. Many people delayed getting married or having children during the Second World War, but after the war there was a baby boom. This led to the total fertility rate peaking at 2.94 in 1964. By 1995 it had fallen to 1.77. According to *Social Trends 2006*, it fell further to 1.63 in 2001 before returning to 1.77 in 2004.

In part, the decline in fertility is a consequence of women having children later in life. According to *Social*

Trends 2006, in 1971 the average age of mothers at first birth was 23.7 but by 2004 it had risen considerably to 27.1. The average age for all births also rose, from 26.6 in 1971 to 28.9 in 2004. The later women leave it before they have their first child, the fewer fertile years they have remaining, making it likely that they will have fewer children.

Morgan (2003) sees the decline in fertility as part of the general decline in family life. She links it to the rise in cohabitation, noting that women who are cohabiting rather than married are more likely to have only one child. She points out that the birth rate would be even lower and the average age at birth even higher were it not for a rise in the number of pregnancies amongst unmarried teenage girls.

However, from another point of view there is nothing surprising about a decline in the birth rate and it does not necessarily indicate a decline in family life. According to a number of geographers (see Waugh, 2000), the decline can be seen as a part of a demographic transition which takes place in all developed societies. According to this model, the birth and fertility rates fall for the following reasons:

- 1 Access to contraception, sterilization and abortion make family planning easier.
- 2 An increased desire for material goods coupled with an increasing cost of raising children creates incentives for smaller families.
- 3 The emancipation of women, and their consequent greater participation in paid work, leads to women combining careers with motherhood. This encourages women to have fewer children and to delay childbirth until their careers are established.
- 4 A decline in the death rate for young children, as a result of improvements in hygiene and medical care, means that there is less pressure to have many children in case one or more of them dies before reaching adulthood.

Eventually these changes can lead to a situation where, without immigration, the population declines since there are more deaths than births. If the decline in births and fertility is seen as an inevitable consequence of social change, it does not necessarily indicate a declining commitment to family life. Indeed, some theorists have argued that as fewer children are born, the family simply becomes more child-centred. More time and energy are devoted to the smaller number of children in each family.

Single-person households

An alternative to marriage is to live on one's own. Many single-person households may be formed as a result of divorce, separation, the break-up of a partnership involving cohabitation, or the death of a partner. However, others may result from a deliberate choice to live alone.

There is statistical evidence that single-person households are becoming more common. According to government statistics, in 1971 6 per cent of people lived alone in Great Britain, but by 2005 this had doubled to 12 per cent. Over the same period the proportion of one-person households rose from 18 per cent to 29 per cent.

In part this increase is due to the ageing of the population, but it is also a result of an increase in the proportion of the young living alone.

According to *Social Trends 2006*, there was a doubling in the proportion of young people aged 25 to 44, and men aged 45 to 64, living alone between 1986/7 and 2005/6. Richard Berthoud (2000) used data from the General Household Survey to show that the proportion of people in their twenties who lived alone increased from 3 per cent in 1973 to 9 per cent in 1996.

Jon Bernardes (1997) believes there are strong social pressures discouraging people from remaining single because society portrays marriage as the ideal state. He says, 'Predominant ideologies emphasize the "normality" of forming intimate partnerships and the "abnormality" of remaining single for too long.' However, despite Bernardes's claims, the increasing frequency of single-person households among those below retirement age does suggest there is greater acceptance of a single status as an alternative to marriage or cohabitation.

Jennifer Somerville (2000) certainly sees the rise in single-person households as a significant trend. She argues there has been a particularly large rise in the percentage of young men who live alone, both because of later marriage and increased divorce.

John Macionis and Ken Plummer (1997) claim that among women aged 20 to 24 in the USA the proportion who were single (although not necessarily living alone) increased from 28 per cent in 1960 to 67 per cent in 1994. They comment: 'Underlying this trend is women's greater participation in the labour force: women who are economically secure view a husband as a matter of choice rather than a financial necessity.'

Fran Wasoff, Lynn Jamieson and Adam Smith (2005), however, analysed data from the British Household Panel Survey between 1991 and 2002 to discover how the situation of people living alone changes over time. They found that only 7 per cent remained living alone throughout the whole period. They therefore argue: 'This suggests that transition between solo living and living with others is commonplace and that the boundaries between solo living and family living are frequently crossed' (Wasoff *et al.*, 2005, p. 213).

Furthermore, Wasoff *et al.* used data from the Scottish Household Survey to show that most people living on their own retain frequent contacts with other family members. For example, 59 per cent had been to visit relatives in the last fortnight (compared to 68 per cent of those who did not live alone). For most young people, solo living is a temporary phase which often ends with cohabitation or marriage, and during solo living most people retain family contacts.

Marital breakdown

The second type of threat to contemporary marriage and family life is the apparent rise in marital breakdowns. The usual way of estimating the number of such breakdowns is through an examination of the divorce statistics, but these statistics do not, on their own, provide a valid measure of marital breakdown.

Marital breakdown can be divided into three main categories:

- 1 **Divorce**, which refers to the legal termination of a marriage.
- 2 **Separation**, which refers to the physical separation of the spouses: they no longer share the same dwelling.
- 3 So-called **empty-shell marriages**, where the spouses live together, remain legally married, but their marriage exists in name only.

These three categories must be considered in any assessment of the rate of marital breakdown.

Divorce statistics

Despite minor fluctuations, there was a steady rise in divorce rates in modern industrial societies throughout the twentieth century.

In 1911, 859 petitions for divorce were filed in England and Wales, of which some three-quarters were granted. The number of divorces gradually increased in the first half of the twentieth century, but was still relatively low during the 1950s at less than 40,000 a year. However, the numbers doubled between 1961 and 1969 and doubled again by 1992. The number of divorces peaked in 1993 at 180,000 before dropping a little to 155,000 in 2000. There was an increase to 167,100 in 2004 (*Social Trends 2006*), though the number declined to 153,399 the following year (National Statistics News Release, September 2006).

Figure 8.1 (see p. 505) shows trends in divorce between 1950 and 2003 and illustrates the closing gap between the number of first marriages and the number of divorces.

The proportion of marriages that are remarriages has also been rising. For example, government statistics show that 15 per cent of all marriages in the UK in 1961 were remarriages for one or both partners; by 2005 this figure had risen to approximately 40 per cent.

Whichever way the figures are presented, the increase in divorce is dramatic. This rise is not confined to Britain. The USA has an even higher rate than Britain, and nearly all industrial societies have experienced an increase in the divorce rate over the past few decades.

Separation statistics

Reliable figures for separation are unobtainable. In Britain some indication is provided by data from the 2001 census, which suggest that around 2 per cent of people are separated and living alone. The number of judicial separations increased in the 1960s by about 65 per cent according to Chester (1985), but this did not necessarily mean an increase in separations, since the number of unrecorded separations is unknown. Today few separations are officially recorded so there are no official statistics which give a reliable indication of long-term trends in separation.

Empty-shell marriages

Estimates of the extent of empty-shell marriages can only be based on guesswork. Even where data exist, the concept is difficult to **operationalize** (that is, put into a measurable form). For example, if a couple express a high level of dissatisfaction with their relationship, should this be termed an empty-shell marriage?

Historical evidence gives the impression that empty-shell marriages are more likely to end in separation and

divorce today than in the past. William J. Goode argues that in nineteenth-century America:

People took for granted that spouses who no longer loved one another and who found life together distasteful should at least live together in public amity for the sake of their children and of their standing in the community.
Goode, 1971

Even though an increasing number of empty-shell marriages may end in separation and divorce today, this does not necessarily mean that the proportion of such marriages, in relation to the total number of marriages, is decreasing.

In view of the problems involved in measuring marital breakdown it is impossible to be completely confident about overall rates of breakdown. However, levels of divorce are now so high that it is probably true that more marriages break down today than they did several decades ago.

Explanations for marital breakdowns

In *When Marriage Ends* (1976), Nicky Hart argued that any explanation of marital breakdown must consider the following factors:

- 1 Those which affect the value attached to marriage
- 2 Those which affect the degree of conflict between the spouses
- 3 Those which affect the opportunities for individuals to escape from marriage

We will first consider these factors from a functionalist perspective. From this viewpoint, behaviour is largely a response to shared norms and values. It therefore follows that a change in the rate of marital breakdown is to some degree a reflection of changing norms and values in general, and, in particular, those associated with marriage and divorce.

The value of marriage

Functionalists such as Talcott Parsons and Ronald Fletcher argue that the rise in marital breakdown stems largely from the fact that marriage is increasingly valued. People expect and demand more from marriage and consequently are more likely to end a relationship which may have been acceptable in the past. Thus Fletcher (1966) argues, 'a relatively high divorce rate may be indicative not of lower but of higher standards of marriage in society'.

The high rate of remarriage apparently lends support to Parsons's and Fletcher's arguments. Thus, paradoxically, the higher value placed on marriage may result in increased marital breakdown.

Research suggests that people do still attach a high value to marriage. From their analysis of the British Social Attitudes Survey, Barlow *et al.* (2001) found that most people do regard marriage as more than 'just a piece of paper'. However, they also regard cohabitation as an acceptable alternative (see p. 503 for further details). Thus, Barlow *et al.* found no evidence that people attach a higher value to marriage than they used to. Other explanations therefore seem more plausible.

Hart (1976) argues that the second set of factors that must be considered in an explanation of marital breakdown are those which affect the degree of conflict between the spouses.

From a functionalist perspective it can be argued that the adaptation of the family to the requirements of the economic system has placed a strain on the marital relationship. It has led to the relative isolation of the nuclear family from the wider kinship network. William J. Goode (1971) argues that, as a result, the family 'carries a heavier emotional burden when it exists independently than when it is a small unit within a larger kin fabric. As a consequence, this unit is relatively fragile.'

Edmund Leach (1967) makes a similar point. He suggests the nuclear family suffers from an emotional overload, which increases the level of conflict between its members.

In industrial society the family specializes in fewer functions. It can be argued that, as a result, there are fewer bonds to unite its members. The economic bond, for example, is considerably weakened when the family ceases to be a unit of production.

N. Dennis (1975) suggests that the specialization of function which characterizes the modern family will lead to increased marital breakdown. Dennis argues that this can place a strain on the strength of the bond between husband and wife. Put simply, when love goes, there is nothing much left to hold the couple together.

Similar points have been made by sociologists who would not regard themselves as functionalists. Graham Allan and Graham Crow (2001) believe 'marriage is less embedded within the economic system' than it used to be. There are fewer family-owned businesses and, most importantly, husbands and wives now usually have independent sources of income from paid employment. Since fewer people now rely as much as they used to on membership of the family to maintain their income, they are less willing to accept conflict with their spouse and more willing to contemplate divorce. Allan and Crow (2001) say, 'incompatibilities which were tolerated are now seen as intolerable; and the absence of love, once seen as unfortunate but bearable, is now taken as indicative of the irretrievable breakdown of marriage'.

These changes particularly affect the willingness of married women to contemplate divorce. It is increasingly likely that married women will have an independent source of income. Official statistics seem to support the view that it is largely wives' dissatisfaction with marriage that accounts for the rising divorce rate. In 2005, 69 per cent of divorces were granted to wives, and in over half of these cases the husband's behaviour was the reason for the divorce (National Statistics News Release, September 2006). This was a dramatic change in comparison with 1946, when wives accounted for 37 per cent of petitions for divorce and husbands for 63 per cent.

Modernity, freedom and choice

Colin Gibson (1994) combines elements of the previous two arguments in claiming that the development of modernity has increased the likelihood of conflict between spouses. The way modernity has developed puts increasing emphasis upon the desirability of individual achievement.

Gibson argues that people now live in an 'enterprise and free-market culture of individualism in which the licence of choice dominates'. He adds: 'A higher divorce rate may be indicative of modern couples generally anticipating a superior standard of personal marital satisfaction than was expected by their grandparents.'

People increasingly expect to get most of their personal satisfaction from their home life, and 'television programmes reinforce the feeling that togetherness is the consummate life style'. However, the emphasis on togetherness is somewhat undermined by 'the Thatcherite manifesto of unfettered self-seeking interest', so that conflict between spouses becomes more likely if self-fulfilment is not delivered by the marriage.

Individualistic modernity and the ideology of the market emphasize consumer choice, and, if fulfilment is not forthcoming through your first choice of marriage partner, then you are more likely to leave and try an alternative in the hope of greater satisfaction. In the past it was difficult for women in particular to escape from unsatisfactory marriages, but with greater independence – resulting from paid employment and other sources – this is no longer the case. Gibson says, 'Greater freedom to judge, choose and change their mind has encouraged women to become more confident and assertive about what they expect from a marriage.' They increasingly exercise that freedom by leaving marriages that fail to live up to what they expect.

A similar view was supported by Graham Allan and Graham Crow (2001). They argue that marriage is increasingly viewed as a 'relationship rather than a contract'. By getting married, people do not see themselves as entering a binding, lifelong contract; rather, they are hoping to establish a personally satisfying relationship: 'Love, personal commitment and intrinsic satisfaction are now seen as the cornerstones of marriage. The absence of these emotions and feelings is itself justification for ending the relationship.'

Furthermore, as the divorce rate rises, divorce is 'normalized' and 'the emergent definition of marriage as centrally concerned with personal satisfaction and fulfilment is bolstered further'.

(For a general discussion of the relationship between modernity and changes in the family, see pp. 512–14.)

The ease of divorce

So far we have considered the factors which affect the value attached to marriage and those which affect the degree of conflict between spouses. The third set of factors that Hart considers essential to an explanation of marital breakdown are those which affect the opportunities for individuals to escape from marriage. This view is backed up by the British and European Social Attitudes Survey carried out in 1997 (Jowell *et al.*, 1998). It found that 82 per cent of their sample disagreed with the view that 'Even if there are no children a married couple should stay together even if they don't get along'.

If, as the functionalists argue, behaviour is directed by norms and values, a change in the norms and values associated with divorce would be expected. It is generally agreed that the stigma attached to divorce has been considerably reduced. This, in itself, will make divorce easier.

Colin Gibson (1994) believes secularization has weakened the degree to which religious beliefs can bind a

couple together and make divorce less likely (see pp. 429–45 for a discussion of secularization). He says, 'Secularization has also witnessed the fading of the evangelical bond of rigid morality which intertwined the cultural fabric of conformist social mores and habits and the declared public conscience.'

Along with a decline in religious beliefs, there has also been a decline in any set of shared values that might operate to stabilize marriage. He describes the change in the following way:

Within our pluralistic society it has become increasingly difficult to sustain an identifiable common culture containing generally held values, aspirations and symbols. George Formby and his ukulele had a cultural identity embracing men and women, rich and poor, young and old; the vocal form of Madonna does not offer the same symbolic universality. Gibson, 1994

In the absence of any central, shared beliefs in society, anything goes, and there is little or no stigma attached to divorce.

Divorce legislation

The changing attitudes towards divorce have been institutionalized by various changes in the law which have made it much easier to obtain a divorce. In Britain before 1857 a private Act of Parliament was required to obtain a divorce. This was an expensive procedure beyond the means of all but the most wealthy.

Since 1857 the costs of obtaining a divorce have been reduced and the grounds for divorce have been widened. Divorce legislation was influenced by the idea of **matrimonial offence**, the notion that one or both spouses had wronged the other. This was the idea behind the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, which largely limited grounds for divorce to adultery. Although divorce legislation in 1950 widened the grounds to include cruelty and desertion, it was still based on the same principle.

The Divorce Reform Act, which came into force in 1971, no longer emphasized the idea of matrimonial offence and so avoided the need for 'guilty parties'. It defined the grounds for divorce as 'the irretrievable breakdown of the marriage'. This made divorce considerably easier and accounts in part for the dramatic rise in the number of divorces in 1971 (see Figure 8.1, p. 502).

New legislation relating to divorce was introduced at the end of 1984. This reduced the period a couple needed to be married before they could petition for divorce from three years to one year. It also altered the basis on which financial settlements were determined by the courts. From 1984 the conduct of the partners became something the courts could take into account. If the misbehaviour of one partner was responsible for the divorce, they could be awarded less than would otherwise have been expected. The intention behind this seemed to be to counteract what some saw as the anti-male bias in maintenance payments from men to their ex-wives.

The Family Law Act of 1996 introduced a number of new measures. No longer did it have to be demonstrated that one or both partners were at fault in order to prove that the marriage had broken down. Instead, the partners simply

had to assert the marriage had broken down and undergo a 'period of reflection' to consider whether a reconciliation was possible. Normally this period was one year, but for those with children under 16, or where one spouse asked for more time, the period was eighteen months.

The Act also encouraged greater use of mediation, rather than relying on solicitors, to resolve issues such as the division of money and arrangements for children. However, after trials, most of these measures were delayed indefinitely and have not been implemented. One part of the Act that was introduced (in 1997) allowed a spouse who had been the victim of violence from their husband or wife to obtain a non-molestation order.

Despite a reduction in costs, divorce was still an expensive process during the first half of the twentieth century. It was beyond the means of many of the less wealthy. This was partly changed by the Legal Aid and Advice Act of 1949, which provided free legal advice and paid solicitors' fees for those who could not afford them.

The economics of divorce were further eased by the extension of welfare provisions, particularly for single parents with dependent children. The Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act of 2000 (which was implemented in 2002) provided for absent parents to contribute a fixed proportion of their take-home pay towards maintenance costs. This varied from 15 per cent for one child to 25 per cent for three children. Although many consider these provisions far from generous, they do provide single-parent families with the means to exist. (For a discussion of changes relating to parental responsibilities for children after divorce, see pp. 516–17.)

Conclusion

A decline in the rate of marriage, increasing cohabitation outside marriage, the rising number of single-parent families and single-person homes, and the apparent increase in marital breakdown all seem to suggest the decline of marriage as an institution in modern Britain. Yet all of these changes are open to different interpretations, and none – at least on its own – seems likely to make marriage obsolete in the near future.

It is easy to exaggerate the extent to which there has been a retreat from marriage. Robert Chester (1985) says, 'On the evidence, most people will continue not only to spend most of their lives in a family environment, but also to place a high value on it.'

The socialist feminist sociologists Pamela Abbott and Claire Wallace (1992) are also rather sceptical of the belief that the family and marriage are in danger of falling apart. They suggest this view has been encouraged by the New Right (right-wing politicians and thinkers whose views and policies are discussed on pp. 509–10). To Abbott and Wallace, such people have succeeded in setting the agenda of public debate about the family by trying to portray it as under serious threat from moral decay in society as a whole, and they have carefully interpreted the evidence to support their case. Abbot and Wallace say:

We are told how many marriages end in divorce, how many children live in single-parent families and so on. Yet we can also look at these statistics another way – to show the stability of the family. Six out of ten couples who get

married in the 1990s, according to present trends, will stay together until one of them dies. Seven out of eight children are born to parents living together, three-quarters of whom are legally married. Only one in five children will experience parental divorce by the time he or she is 16; that is, four out of five children born to a married couple will be brought up by them in an intact family. In 1985, 78 per cent of British children under 16 were living with both natural parents who were legally married. Abbott and Wallace, 1992

Abbott and Wallace recognize the increasing diversity of family forms, but see the alleged decline of the family and marriage as having been exaggerated for political ends.

Jennifer Somerville (2000) argues that there have been major changes in marriage and family life, but she too thinks they can be exaggerated. Lone parenthood, single-person households, increased cohabitation and the normalization of pre-marital sex are all aspects of contemporary society. However, the vast majority of people in Britain still get married, most marriages still continue until one spouse dies, most people still live in households headed by a married couple, and extended kinship networks remain strong in most people's lives. Somerville therefore argues:

diversification of family forms and relationships ... must be seen in the context of a commitment by the vast majority of the population to a framework of belief in the value of family life and behaviour which seeks to approximate to that ideal. Somerville, 2000

The family, politics and social policy

Despite the traditional British belief that politicians should not interfere in the family, state policies have always had an impact on family life. Taxation, welfare, housing and education policies all influence the way in which people organize their domestic life. The policies adopted can encourage people to live in certain types of household and discourage them from living in other types. Furthermore, in recent decades the family has come to be seen as a legitimate and important subject of public debate.

Bias towards conventional families

Feminists and other radical critics of government policies have sometimes seen them as biased. They have argued that they tend to favour the traditional nuclear family in which there are two parents: a male breadwinner and a wife who stays at home when there are young children. Allan (1985) argues: 'Much state provision ... is based upon an implicit ideology of the "normal" family which through its incorporation into standard practice discourages alternative forms of domestic organization from developing.'

To Allan, these policies encourage 'the standard form of gender and generational relations within families'. In

other words, they assume that one family member will put primary emphasis during their life on childcare rather than work; that families will usually take care of their elderly and sick; and that wives are economically dependent on their husbands.

Daphne Johnson (1982) argues that schools are organized in such a way that it is difficult for single-parent families and dual-worker families to combine work with domestic responsibilities. School hours and holidays mean that families with children find it difficult for the adult members to combine the requirements of employers with their domestic responsibilities.

Roy Parker (1982) claims that state assistance (of a practical rather than financial nature) tends not to be given to the elderly and sick if they live with relatives. It is assumed that the family will care for them. In both the care of the elderly and infirm and the care of children, this generally means wives will be expected to take up these domestic responsibilities, or at least to work only part-time.

It can be argued that, in recent years, Parker's argument has become increasingly valid, at least in terms of its application to elderly people. The state has encouraged families to take responsibility for their elderly members, either in practical or financial terms. Furthermore, the elderly are increasingly required to use their savings to pay for their care in old age rather than receiving free care from the state.

The situation in relation to childcare is less clear-cut. The government now guarantees two and a half hours of approved childcare per weekday for all 3- and 4-year-olds. However, it is not possible to offset the costs of childcare against earnings to reduce the size of tax bills. This reduces the incentive for mothers (or the primary carer) to seek paid employment, since any childcare costs have to be paid out of income from employment which is liable to taxation.

The **Working Tax Credit** and **Child Tax Credit** (introduced in April 2003) do, however, allow help with childcare, but the Working Tax Credit only applies to low income families where both partners are in paid employment. This discourages women in these families from staying at home to look after their children.

In public housing policy the formal emphasis is usually upon making children's needs a priority. However, Lorraine Fox Harding (1996) believes that in practice married couples with children tend to be favoured over single parents with children. Single parents are usually provided with the least desirable housing. Furthermore, 'Most dwellings are constructed for the nuclear family and are planned and designed by men. Units are privatized and self-contained. The centrality of family housing reinforces dominant notions of family and non-family households.' Few council or other public houses have been built to accommodate groups larger than conventional nuclear families.

Fox Harding believes regulations relating to maternity leave and pay reinforce traditional gender roles. In Britain, unlike some other European countries, fathers have very limited rights to leave from work on the birth of a child, compared with women. Furthermore, 'Benefits for pregnancy and the period after childbirth are inadequate, reflecting the assumption that women have the support of a male partner.'

In 1993 the **Child Support Agency** was established. It oversees the payment of maintenance by 'absent' parents to the parents responsible for looking after the children. Its

work therefore covers divorced, separated and never-married couples who live apart.

The agency was set up to make sure that fathers in particular would find it more difficult to escape financial responsibility for their children. In this respect it can be seen as supporting the traditional family by imposing financial costs on those who do not live in one. (In 2006 it was announced that the Child Support Agency would be replaced in 2008 by a Child Maintenance and Support Commission which would have similar functions.)

The Child Support Agency has been highly controversial and highly criticized. For example, many argue that its main aim is not to help children but rather to save the Treasury money, since maintenance payments usually reduce the benefits paid to single mothers. Indeed, in its first year the agency was set a target of saving £530 million of taxpayers' money. However, it was clear that Conservative ministers supported the agency not just to save money, but also because they saw it as helping to uphold moral values relating to parental responsibility. As we will see, the Labour government elected in 1997 in some ways continued to support such policies on similar grounds.

As Fox Harding notes, cuts in welfare provision in the 1980s and 1990s had the effect of extending family responsibilities beyond the immediate, nuclear family. This was in contrast to earlier decades of the twentieth century, when there was a tendency for the state to take over responsibilities that had previously been left to families. Fox Harding gives the example of care of the elderly and care of offspring aged 18–25. In both cases cuts in benefits have put the onus on families to help, even though they have not been made legally responsible for doing so. Fox Harding also sees the increased emphasis on absent parents supporting their offspring as an example of the state's attempt to extend familial responsibilities.

Policies which do not support conventional families

Not all government policies can be seen as supporting conventional families or traditional gender roles within them. For example, there have been some measures which might be seen as undermining traditional male dominance within families. Fox Harding points out that in 1991 the House of Lords ruled that men were no longer exempt from being charged with raping their wives. Traditional patriarchal authority relations within families have been further undermined by increasing intolerance of men using violence to discipline their wives or children.

The gradual liberalization of divorce laws shows a willingness to accept that marriage does not guarantee the long-term stability of a family. Some legal concessions have been made to recognize the rights of cohabitants who are not married. Fox Harding says, 'there are some rights which have been extended to cohabitantes, such as succession to tenancies and inheritance in certain circumstances, and the right to have orders made to restrain violence'. Cohabiting gay or lesbian couples have few legal rights relating specifically to such relationships (although from 2005 they were able to register civil partnerships).

Brenda Almond (2006) believes that recent policies undermine traditional family structures. She claims that tax legislation discriminates against families where there is

one breadwinner. They cannot use their partner's tax allowances and two-earner families tend, therefore, to pay less tax than one-earner families.

Almond believes that the liberalization of divorce laws undermines the idea of marriage as a lifelong commitment, and that the recognition of civil partnerships for gay and lesbian couples sends signals to people that conventional families are no longer seen as preferable to other living arrangements.

Pamela Abbott and Claire Wallace – the family and the New Right

Pamela Abbott and Claire Wallace (1992) examined the view of the family and social policy put forward by the New Right (sometimes called market liberals or neoliberals) in Britain and the USA in the 1980s. Instead of arguing that government policy was biased in favour of the conventional family, the New Right argued that government policy was undermining it and policies had to be changed.

In Britain, New Right thinking was promoted by individual journalists and academics – for example, Paul Johnson and Roger Scruton – and by 'think-tanks' such as the Centre for Policy Studies and the Adam Smith Institute.

In the USA a variety of pressure groups campaigned to reassert traditional morality and family relationships. Abbott and Wallace describe them as a 'Pro-Family' movement and say it 'developed out of an alliance of political, religious, anti-feminist and pro-life anti-abortion groups'.

In Britain, the 'Pro-Family' movement was not as strong, but the anti-abortion movement and individuals like Victoria Gillick (who campaigned to stop doctors prescribing contraceptives to girls under 16 without parental consent) and organizations like Families Need Fathers (which is opposed to divorce) supported similar causes to their American counterparts.

Abbott and Wallace argue that the New Right advocated 'liberal economic policies with support for conservative social moral values'. Members of the New Right saw the family as being under threat from permissiveness, social change and government policies, and this in turn threatened the stability of society. To them, the family operates properly when it remains stable and the wife is responsible for socializing children so that they conform to society's norms and values. The husband, as principal breadwinner, is disciplined by the need to provide for his family.

The New Right saw many signs of the family becoming unable to carry out its proper role. These included 'working mothers (who by taking paid work fail to put the needs of their children first), increased divorce rates, higher numbers of single-parent families and open homosexuality'. Members of the New Right argued that such changes played a major role in causing social problems such as crime, delinquency and drug abuse.

The New Right and politics

In trying to influence political debate and the actions of governments, the New Right tried to change what it saw as harmful social policies.

Abbot and Wallace argue that the New Right attacked welfare systems for encouraging deviant lifestyles and family forms. For example, welfare payments allowed mothers to bring up their children in single-parent families, taxation policies discriminated against married couples, divorce laws made it easier to end marriage, and abortion laws and the relaxation of laws against homosexuality undermined traditional morality.

Indeed, from this point of view, government policy further undermined the family by taking from conventional families and giving to deviant households. Welfare payments to single mothers drove up taxation to the point where wives with young children were forced to take paid employment to make ends meet. As a result, even those who wished to live in conventional nuclear families, with the mother at home, were unable to do so, and more children were socialized in unsatisfactory ways.

The New Right was in a position to influence social policy because of the election of political leaders sympathetic to its views. These included Ronald Reagan, president of the USA from 1980 to 1988, and Margaret Thatcher, who was prime minister of Britain throughout the 1980s.

In a speech in May 1988, Thatcher said:

The family is the building block of society. It's a nursery, a school, a hospital, a leisure place, a place of refuge and a place of rest. It encompasses the whole of society. It fashions beliefs. It's the preparation for the rest of our life and women run it. Quoted in Abbott and Wallace, 1992

The New Right and policies

On the surface, it would appear that the New Right had a major impact on government policy on both sides of the Atlantic. Abbott and Wallace do identify some policies that were influenced by its ideas. For example, the 1988 budget changed taxation so that cohabiting couples could no longer claim more in tax allowances than a married couple. It also prevented cohabiting couples from claiming two lots of income tax relief on a shared mortgage when a married couple could only claim one.

However, in many other ways the New Right failed to achieve the changes it wanted. In terms of moral policies, divorce was actually made easier in 1984, and further legislation gave 'illegitimate' children the same rights as those born within marriage.

Conservative governments did not introduce any tax or benefits policies to encourage mothers to stay at home with young children and, to Abbot and Wallace, many Thatcherite policies actually undermined family life. Such policies included: the freezing of child benefit, economic policies which forced up unemployment, the emphasis on home ownership and opposition to the provision of council housing, and cuts in education spending and the real levels of student grants. All of these policies hit the finances of families, with the result that, far from encouraging self-reliance, 'Many families and individuals have had their ability to care for themselves reduced, not increased.'

To Abbott and Wallace, the main purpose of government policies under Thatcher was to reduce public spending; maintaining the traditional family was very much a secondary consideration. They conclude:

The welfare and economic policies advocated by the New Right – in so far as they have been implemented by the Thatcher and Reagan administrations – have been more concerned with reasserting the rights of middle-class men and maintaining capitalism than they have been with a genuine concern for men, women and children and the quality of their lives. Abbott and Wallace, 1992

The family under John Major's government

Margaret Thatcher left office in 1990 and was replaced as prime minister by John Major. Major remained in office until the Labour Party displaced the Conservatives in government in the election of 1997.

Ruth Lister (1996) reviewed the approach to the family adopted by John Major. She notes that Major did take an interest in the family as an issue. He gave specific responsibility for family matters to a cabinet member (Virginia Bottomley). He also ended the erosion in the value of child benefit in an apparent attempt to give extra support to families with children. The Child Support Agency, which tried to get absent fathers to pay maintenance costs for their children, was also launched during Major's period in office.

A White Paper concerned with adoption came down strongly in favour of giving priority to married couples, and against allowing adoption for gay and lesbian couples. Many of Major's cabinet ministers made strong attacks upon single parents, particularly at the 1993 Conservative Party conference. Lister describes this as an 'orgy of lone-parent bashing'. John Major himself launched a 'Back to Basics' campaign at the same conference, which included an emphasis on the virtues of conventional family life.

However, the Back to Basics campaign floundered after a number of embarrassing revelations about the personal lives of several Conservative MPs and ministers. According to Lister, from 1994 John Major encouraged his cabinet colleagues to tone down their rhetoric criticizing single parents.

In general, Major's period in office saw a considerable concern about families, but little change in government policies. Lister therefore concludes that the Major government:

is more likely to be remembered for the 'moral panic' about the breakdown of the 'family' and for the backlash against lone-parent families that it helped to unleash, together with the legacy it inherited in the form of the Child Support Act, than for any distinctive policies of its own directed towards families and women. Lister, 1996

Carol Smart and Bren Neale – childcare and divorce

Carol Smart and Bren Neale (1999) examined one particular area of family policy – laws relating to childcare after divorce – during the era of Margaret Thatcher and John Major's administrations. They detected a significant shift in the emphasis in policies during this period.

In the 1960s and 1970s, most legislation involved **liberalizing** the law in response to public demand for more freedom to choose how they organized their family life. People were becoming increasingly unwilling to

The family and New Labour

accept that their own happiness should be restricted by laws which reinforced conventional morality and made it difficult for them to divorce.

However, by the 1980s, governments were changing the emphasis towards trying to combat some of the negative effects they believed stemmed from the liberal legislation. In particular, they were concerned about the effects of divorce on children and felt it was important to ensure that parents honoured their responsibilities to children after divorce. Smart and Neale say:

There has been a notable shift from a 'permissive' approach of the late 1960s, which basically led to governments responding to popular pressure concerning the private sphere and personal morality, towards social engineering designed to mitigate the perceived harms generated by the previous permissiveness. Smart and Neale, 1999

This change of emphasis was evident in a number of Acts of Parliament: the Children's Act (1989), the Child Support Act (1991) and the Family Law Act (1996). Earlier divorce legislation had encouraged the idea of the 'clean break' between ex-spouses on divorce, so that they could start a new life and put the problems of their dissolved marriage behind them. This new legislation emphasized the priority that should be given to the needs of children and was based upon the principle that both biological parents should share responsibility for their offspring.

Divorce was regarded as a social problem in this legislation because it could disadvantage the children. The Children's Act (1989) stopped the practice of awarding custody of children to one or other parent and introduced 'an automatic presumption that mothers and fathers simply retained all the parental responsibility they enjoyed during marriage beyond legal divorce'. While the courts could decide on where children lived and how much access the non-resident parent could have, joint responsibility was assumed and parents were encouraged to make their own arrangements where possible.

Smart and Neale argue that this legislation was intended to reinforce parental aspects of traditional family responsibilities, while acknowledging it would be impossible to force spouses to stay together against their will. The implicit aims were to:

- *prioritize first families;*
- *discourage clean breaks on divorce;*
- *prioritize parenthood over spousal obligations;*
- *prioritize biological parentage and descent;*
- *challenge the popular understanding of divorce as a solution to private problems;*
- *identify divorce as a social problem.*

In all these ways the policy was intended to emphasize moral values associated with traditional families without actively trying to prevent the formation of the types of family diversity which are the result of divorce.

In terms of this analysis, then, aspects of the conventional family were supported by legislation in this period, albeit in a form which recognized the existence of diversity. Smart and Neale do not examine how far these principles continued to be important after the Labour government took office in 1997. This issue will be examined next.

Family values

Although support for 'family values' has traditionally been associated with more right-wing thinkers and political parties, it has begun to exercise some influence over the British Labour Party.

Elizabeth Silva and Carol Smart (1999) claim the 'political mantra on the family is not peculiar to Conservative governments but has also become a theme of New Labour in Britain'. They quote Tony Blair's 1997 conference speech in which he said: 'We cannot say we want a strong and secure society when we ignore its very foundations: family life. This is not about preaching to individuals about their private lives. It is addressing a huge social problem.' He went on to cite teenage pregnancies, families unable to care for their elderly members, poor parental role models, truancy, educational underachievement and even unhappiness as among the social problems which could stem from the failure to achieve successful family life. Blair pledged that the government would examine every area of government policy to see how it could strengthen family life.

Silva and Smart suggest that Blair was really talking about a specific type of family life. They say, 'Strong families are, of course, seen as conjugal, heterosexual parents with an employed male breadwinner. Lone mothers and gay couples do not, by definition, constitute strong families in this rhetoric.' However, they believe that Blair and the Labour government recognized that social change had occurred and that it was not possible to follow policies that pretended that most people continued to live in conventional families.

Supporting Families

This concern with families led to the Labour government setting up a committee, chaired by the home secretary Jack Straw, to produce a consultation paper, or Green Paper. This was published in 1998 under the title *Supporting Families*. The Green Paper suggested a whole range of measures to provide 'better services and support for parents', such as a National Family and Parenting Institute to coordinate and publicize services available to families. It suggested a greater role for health visitors in helping out families. It also made proposals which would help people to balance the requirements of work and their home life. These included longer maternity leave, a right to three months' unpaid leave for both parents, and a right to time off (from employment) for family reasons.

The paper included measures designed to strengthen marriage and to reduce the number of marriage breakdowns. These included giving registrars a greater role in advising married couples, and improvements to the information couples received before marriage. It also suggested making pre-nuptial agreements (for example, about who gets what in the event of divorce) legally binding.

The paper suggested it was necessary to take measures to cut teenage pregnancies because these were associated with wider social problems. With regard to single parents, the Green Paper heralded the introduction of a **New Deal**. This involved ensuring that single parents received personal help

and advice to assist them in returning to paid employment if they wished to do so. For low income families a **Working Families Tax Credit** was to be introduced which allowed them to claim some tax relief against a proportion of the childcare costs they incurred by going to work.

Conclusion

In general the measures proposed and introduced by the New Labour government were based around strengthening conventional families. However, they certainly moved away from the idea that families should have a single earner and that women should stay at home to look after children. As described above, a number of measures were taken to help parents combine paid work with domestic responsibilities. The Green Paper said:

We also need to acknowledge just how much families have changed. Family structures have become more complicated, with many more children living with stepparents or in single-parent households. They may face extra difficulties and we have designed practical support with these parents in mind. Supporting Families, 1998

The paper accepted that single parents and unmarried couples could sometimes raise children successfully, but none the less said that 'marriage is still the surest foundation for raising children and remains the choice of the people in Britain'. No mention was made of providing support for single people.

Alan Barlow, Simon Duncan and Grace James argue that New Labour 'proclaims moral tolerance. Nevertheless, it still firmly states that marriage is the ideal state and that living with two biological and preferably married parents is the best for children' (Barlow *et al.*, 2002, p. 116). They note, though, that there is a strong emphasis on paid work 'as a moral duty and not the unpaid caring that most lone mothers place first' (p. 114).

Although not condemning lone mothers, New Labour sees two parents as preferable because this makes it easier for one or both adults to do paid work and therefore avoid reliance upon benefits. Barlow *et al.* see New Labour as having done little to introduce policies to support alternatives to conventional family life. For example, they have not introduced new rights for people who cohabit.

Despite a toning down of the rhetoric criticizing unconventional families and non-family groups, the policies of New Labour continued to idealize stable, long-lasting marriage and nuclear families. Jennifer Somerville (2000) says that Tony Blair's government idealized the family as 'a working example of mutual interdependence, care and responsibility'. It also 'increased the expectations of parental responsibility with regard to financial support for children, children's conduct and educational achievement'. Aspects of New Labour thinking still reflect the family agenda originally pushed to the forefront of politics in Britain by the New Right.

However, at least in one area, the Labour government took steps to introduce legal protection for an alternative to conventional marriage. Not only did it introduce civil partnerships for gay and lesbian couples, but it also banned discrimination on the basis of sexuality, including in applications for adoption, meaning that gay and lesbian families gained an unprecedented degree of legal recognition.

Families, modernity and postmodernity

Much of this chapter has suggested that significant changes have taken place in family life in Europe and North America (as well as elsewhere) over the last few decades. Although some sociologists have stressed that it is important not to exaggerate the extent of the changes, all acknowledge that at least some changes have taken place.

A number of sociologists have related the changes to the concepts of modernity or postmodernity. They have seen them as part and parcel of changes in society as a whole. Although the sociologists examined in this section disagree about whether social changes should be seen as part of the development of modernity or as part of a postmodern stage in the development of society, there are some similarities in the sorts of changes they relate to the development of the family.

Anthony Giddens – *The Transformation of Intimacy*

In an influential book, the British sociologist Anthony Giddens argues that major changes have taken place in intimate relationships between people (particularly relationships between sexual partners). He relates these changes to the development of what he calls high modernity (his concept of high modernity is discussed on pp. 895–9).

Romantic love

Giddens (1992) argues that premodern relationships in Europe were largely based around 'economic circumstance'. People got married to particular people largely to provide an economic context in which to produce a family. For the peasantry, life was so hard it 'was unlikely to be conducive to sexual passion'. Married couples, according to research quoted by Giddens, rarely kissed or caressed. The aristocracy also married for reasons to do with reproduction and forming economic connections between families.

However, in the eighteenth century the idea of **romantic love** began to develop, first among the aristocracy. Romantic love involved idealizing the object of one's love and, for women in particular, telling stories to oneself about how one's life could become fulfilled through the relationship.

The idea of romantic love was closely connected to the emergence of the novel as a literary form – romantic novels played an important part in spreading the idea of romantic love. It was also related to the limitation of family size. This allowed sex, for women, to gradually become separated from an endless round of (at the time very dangerous) pregnancy and childbirth. Romantic love contains the idea that people will be attracted to one another and this attraction will lead to the partners being bound together.

In theory, romantic love should be egalitarian. The bond is based upon mutual attraction. In practice, however, it has tended to lead to the dominance of men. Giddens says, 'For women dreams of romantic love have all too often led to grim domestic subjection.' Sex is important in romantic love, but a successful sexual relationship is seen as stemming from the romantic attraction, and not the other way round. In the ideal of romantic love, a woman saves herself, preserves her virginity, until the perfect man comes along.

Plastic sexuality

Giddens argues that in the most recent phase of modernity the nature of intimate relationships has undergone profound changes. Virginity for women is no longer prized, and few women are virgins on their marriage day. **Plastic sexuality** has developed. With plastic sexuality, sex can be freed from its association with childbirth altogether. People have much greater choice over when, how often and with whom they engage in sex.

The development of plastic sexuality was obviously connected to the development of improved methods of contraception. To Giddens, however, it began to emerge before these technological developments and has more social than technical origins. In particular, as we will see, it was tied up with the development of a sense of the self that could be actively chosen.

Confluent love and the pure relationship

The emergence of plastic sexuality changes the nature of love. Romantic love is increasingly replaced by **confluent love**. Confluent love is 'active contingent love' which 'jars with the "forever", "one-and-only" qualities of the romantic love complex'.

In earlier eras divorce was difficult or impossible to obtain and it was difficult to engage openly in pre-marital relationships. Once people had married through romantic love they were usually stuck with one another however their relationship developed. Now people have much more choice. They are not compelled to stay together if the relationship is not working.

The ideal which people increasingly base relationships on is the **pure relationship**, rather than a marriage based on romantic passion. Pure relationships continue because people choose to stay in them. Giddens says: 'What holds the pure relationship together is the acceptance on the part of each partner, "until further notice", that each gains sufficient benefit from the relationship to make its continuance worthwhile.'

Love is based upon emotional intimacy and only develops 'to the degree to which each partner is prepared to reveal concerns and needs to the other and to be vulnerable to that other'. These concerns are constantly monitored by people to see if they are deriving sufficient satisfaction from the relationship to continue it. Marriage is increasingly an expression of such relationships once they are already established, rather than a way of achieving them.

However, pure relationships are not confined to marriage or indeed to heterosexual couples. In some cases and in some ways gay and lesbian relationships may come closer to pure relationships than heterosexual ones. Furthermore, pure relationships do not have to be based

upon exclusivity if both partners agree that they will not limit their sexual relationships to one another.

In general, Giddens sees pure relationships as having the potential for creating more equal relationships between men and women. They have an openness and a mutual concern and respect which make it difficult for one partner to be dominant. However, that does not mean that Giddens has an entirely positive view of contemporary marriage and other intimate relationships – far from it. He documents a whole range of emotional, psychological and physical abuses that can occur within contemporary relationships. The pure relationship is more of an ideal than a relationship that has actually been achieved by most intimate couples. But Giddens does think there is a trend towards such relationships, because their development is intimately bound up with the development of modernity.

Modernity and self-identity

Giddens sees **institutional reflexivity** as a key, perhaps the key, characteristic of modernity. In premodern times institutions were largely governed by tradition. They carried on in certain ways because they had operated that way in the past. Modernity involves the increasing application of reason. Reason is used to work out how institutions can work better. Reflexivity describes the way in which people reflect upon the institutions that are part of the social world and try to change them for the better.

Increasingly, such reflexivity reaches into all areas of social life, including very personal areas. For example, publications such as the Kinsey Report (a survey of sexual behaviour among Americans) opened up sex to critical reflection. An increasing number of self-help books, magazine columns and so on are written to help people reflect upon and try to improve their sex lives. Giddens says, 'the rise of such researches signals, and contributes to, an accelerating reflexivity on the level of the ordinary, everyday sexual practices'.

Reflexivity extends into the creation of self-identity. People can increasingly choose who they want to be. They are no longer stuck with the roles into which they are born and confined by the dictates of tradition. Within the limits of the opportunities available to them, people can increasingly shape who they are and who they think themselves to be.

Giddens argues there is a 'reflexive project of the self' which 'is oriented only to control. It has no morality other than authenticity, a modern day version of the old maxim "to thine own self be true"'. People want to discover who they really are, and trying different relationships can be an important part of this process. Seeking a pure relationship may, for example, allow an individual to try to decide whether they are truly homosexual, heterosexual or bisexual.

People have far more choice of lifestyle than in the past, and trying different ones may be part of creating a self-identity. Giddens says, "Today, however, given the lapse of tradition, the question "Who shall I be?" is inextricably bound up with "How shall I live?"

Conclusion

If Giddens's analysis is correct, then it certainly seems to explain the increasing rates of divorce and other relationship breakdowns and the greater pluralism of family

forms. The continuing popularity of marriage could be seen as part of the quest for the pure relationship. Certainly, Giddens seems to be on strong ground in arguing that there is more sense of choice in personal relationships than in the past.

However, Giddens may underestimate the degree to which factors such as class and ethnicity continue to influence the form that relationships take. Furthermore, other sociologists, while agreeing that there is now more choice, see this as resulting from somewhat different processes from those discussed by Giddens. Some see the changes in a much more negative light than Giddens does.

Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim – *The Normal Chaos of Love*

Another influential interpretation of changes in relationships and family life was put forward by the German sociologists Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995, first published in German in 1990). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim follow a similar line of argument to Giddens in claiming that changes in family life and relationships are being shaped by the development of modernity. They also follow Giddens in arguing that modernity is characterized by increasing individual choice, in contrast to an emphasis upon following tradition in premodern societies. However, they characterize this process as involving **individualization** rather than reflexivity, and see it as having rather different consequences from those outlined by Giddens.

Individualization

Individualization involves an extension of the areas of life in which individuals are expected to make their own decisions. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim say: 'The proportion of possibilities in life that do not involve decision making is diminishing and the proportion of biography open to decision making and individual initiative is increasing.' Like Giddens, they contrast this increasing choice with a premodern era in which choice was much more limited and tradition much more important in shaping social life.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim trace the origins of the process of individualization back to a range of factors, including the influence of the Protestant ethic (see pp. 407–9), urbanization and secularization. Most important of all, though, was an increase in personal mobility, both social and geographical. As modern societies opened up, moving place and moving jobs became easier, and this presented individuals with more choices about how to run their lives.

In the second half of the twentieth century this process went on to a new stage in which there was a rapid increase in available choices. The reasons for this included the opening up of educational opportunities, the improvement in the living standards of the lower classes, which freed them from the daily grind of trying to survive in poverty, and improved labour market opportunities for women. This last change has led to new uncertainties in gender roles and has particularly affected intimate relationships.

Choice in families and relationships

If premodern societies gave people little choice about their roles in families and marriages, they did at least provide some stability and certainty. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim say that for individuals the 'severing of traditional ties means being freed of previous constraints and obligations. At the same time, however, the support and security offered by traditional society begin to disappear.' In the absence of such supports and security, individuals have to try to create personal relationships that will provide for their needs.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim say the nuclear family seems to offer 'a sort of refuge in the chilly environment of our affluent, impersonal, uncertain society, stripped of its traditions and scarred by all kinds of risk. Love will become more important than ever and equally impossible.' Love is important because people believe they can express and fulfil their individuality through a loving relationship. Love offers the promise of an 'emotional base' and a 'security system', which are absent in the world outside. However, contemporary societies prevent the formation of such relationships.

Love in the context of successful family relationships has come to depend on individuals finding a successful formula. It can no longer be based upon norms and traditions, since these no longer exist in a form that is generally or even widely accepted. People try out a number of arrangements, such as cohabitation, marriage and divorce, in their search for love. In each relationship they have to work out solutions for how to order their relationships anew. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim describe the situation in the following way:

It is no longer possible to pronounce in some binding way what family, marriage, parenthood, sexuality or love mean, what they should or could be; rather these vary in substance, norms and morality from individual to individual and from relationship to relationship. The answers to the questions above must be worked out, negotiated, arranged and justified in all the details of how, what, why or why not, even if this might unleash the conflicts and devils that lie slumbering among the details and were assumed to be tamed ... Love is becoming a blank that lovers must fill in themselves. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995

The causes of conflict

The amount of choice in itself causes the potential for conflict, but there are other factors that make it even more likely. Earlier periods of industrial modern societies were based upon relatively clear-cut gender roles involving a male breadwinner and a female carer and homemaker. Industrial work by men was founded upon the assumption of a wife who was carrying out housework and childcare tasks. With increased opportunities for women in education and employment, this has changed. Now, both men and women might seek fulfilling careers.

Furthermore, the demands of the capitalist workplace contrast markedly with those of domestic life. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim comment: 'Individual competitiveness and mobility, encouraged by the job market, run up against the opposite expectations at

home where one is expected to sacrifice one's own interests for others and invest in a collective project called family.'

The family is the arena in which these contradictions and conflicts are played out. Men and women argue over who should do the housework, who should look after the kids and whose job should take priority. The results of the arguments are unlikely to satisfy both parties. In the end one person's career or personal development has to take a back seat. In a world where individualization has proceeded so far this is bound to cause resentment.

Conclusion

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim believe these contradictions lead to 'the normal chaos of love'. Love is increasingly craved to provide security in an insecure world, but it is increasingly difficult to find and sustain. The quest for individual fulfilment by both partners in a relationship makes it difficult for them to find common ground. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim conclude pessimistically that 'perhaps the two parallel lines will eventually meet, in the far distant future. Perhaps not. We shall never know.'

Giddens's conclusions seem a little over-optimistic, those of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim seem rather too pessimistic. Some couples do manage to work out their differences and produce mutually satisfactory relationships. However, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim may be right to suggest that the apparent greater choice over relationships can create problems in making them work.

David H.J. Morgan – past-modern sociology and family practices

Past-modern sociology

David Morgan (1996, 1999) has attempted to develop an approach to studying the family which takes account of recent changes in family life without fully embracing postmodernism. He borrows the term **past-modern** from R. Stones (1996) to characterize his approach. Morgan claims this approach draws upon a wide variety of influences, including feminism, postmodernism and interactionism. It tries to avoid the sort of modern approach to studying 'the family' which assumes families have a fixed structure and clear boundaries between themselves and the outside world. He would reject, therefore, the kinds of approaches used by Parsons (see pp. 463 and 474–5) and Young and Willmott (pp. 476–8), which tend to see a single dominant type of family evolving alongside the development of modern societies.

On the other hand, Morgan is also opposed to an extreme version of postmodernism 'that would threaten to empty sociological enquiry (of any kind) of any content' (Morgan, 1999). Morgan believes we should acknowledge the changes taking place in family lives, but we should not reject the use of all empirical evidence. He says: 'the assemblage of carefully collected "facts" about family living is not to be despised but neither is it to be seen as the culmination of family analysis'.

Changes in family living

Morgan believes modern approaches to studying family living have become outdated because of changes in families and societies. Both are increasingly characterized by 'flux, fluidity and change'. 'The family' is not a static entity which can be frozen at a moment in time so that its form can be clearly analysed. Rather, it is constituted by ongoing processes of change, and overlaps considerably (and in changing ways) with the society that surrounds it. In the conventional sociological way of thinking about families:

Family living is not about hospital waiting lists, size of classrooms or the availability of public transport. Yet such matters, in the experiences of individual members, may be at least as much to do with routine family living as the matters subsumed under the statistical tables [such as those about household size, divorce rates and so on].

Morgan, 1999

Morgan's alternative approach attempts to take account of the blurred boundaries between families and the outside world, and the constantly changing nature of family life.

Family practices

Morgan believes the study of the family should focus on **family practices** rather than, for example, family structure. Family practices are concerned with what family members actually do, and with the accounts they give of what they do.

Unlike some postmodernists, Morgan does not believe that what families do should be reduced to the descriptions of what they do. He believes there is a social reality that really exists and can be described and analysed by sociologists. That reality is independent of sociologists' descriptions of it. However, that should not stop sociologists from also discussing the way in which people talk about and describe their own family lives.

Morgan goes on to outline the central themes brought out by the idea of family practices:

- 1 'A sense of interplay between the perspectives of the social actor, the individual whose actions are being described and accounted for, and the perspectives of the observer.' For example, researchers should examine how far individuals see themselves as members of families, and they should consider where people draw the boundary between their family and non-family members.
- 2 'A sense of the active rather than the passive.' People do not just occupy particular roles, they actively construct their lives. Gender, class and family relationships are all worked out by people in the course of their actions; they are not predetermined. Even something as apparently passive as sleeping involves actively working out what are seen as appropriate sleeping arrangements for different family members.
- 3 'A focus on the everyday.' Routine family practices, such as how breakfast is organized and consumed, can tell you as much, if not more, about family life as examining less mundane events, such as weddings.
- 4 'A stress on regularities.' Although family life may change frequently, there are often regular patterns that reoccur, particularly in daily routines. Sociologists

should not lose sight of these regularities, which may well be part of the taken-for-granted life of families.

- 5 Despite the importance of regularities, Morgan also believes there should be 'a sense of fluidity'. Family practices will flow into practices from other spheres of social life. He says:

Thus a family outing might consist of a variety of different family practices while also blending with gendered practices, leisure practices and so on. Further, the family outing may well be linked in the perceptions of the participants to other such outings, to anticipated future outings and the planning involved in each case.

Morgan, 1999

- 6 'An interplay between history and biography.' The focus should not be entirely upon the experience of family life on an everyday basis, but should also be linked to a consideration of the historical development of society as a whole. Family outings, for example, are linked to 'a wider historical framework to do with the development of leisure, transportation and shifting constructions of parenthood and childhood'.

Although a little vague, Morgan's past-modern approach does offer the possibility of analysing family life in a way which is sensitive to contemporary changes but which also rests upon detailed evidence. It suggests that some of the older debates about family structure and the 'typical' or 'conventional' family may be becoming less useful for understanding family life today. It also offers the possibility of examining areas of family life (such as outings and use of health services) which have not usually been the focus of study for sociologists of 'the family'.

Carol Smart and Bren Neale – Family Fragments?

A positive sense of self

In a study of divorce and parenthood based upon interviews with sixty parents in West Yorkshire, Smart and Neale (1999) make use of aspects of the work of both Giddens and Morgan. Following Giddens, Smart and Neale found that the process of divorce often involves an attempt to re-establish a positive sense of self by moving beyond a relationship that has failed to provide satisfaction.

As discussed earlier (see pp. 510–11), Smart and Neale believe divorce law in the 1960s and 1970s embraced the idea that individuals should have the opportunity to re-establish a sense of self after divorce by accepting the idea of a 'clean break'. Freed from any need to continue to associate with their former spouse, each divorcee could go about constructing a new sense of identity and perhaps seeking a new 'pure' relationship.

However, in the 1980s and 1990s new laws undermined the possibility of a clean break, at least where there were children from the marriage. Divorcing couples were forced to continue a relationship with their former spouse through the need to negotiate over childcare responsibilities.

Furthermore, Smart and Neale argue that a problem with Giddens's ideas is that he fails to distinguish between the situations of men and women. Influenced by feminist

thinking, Smart and Neale maintain that men and women can be in different situations when they try to develop a new identity after divorce. In their research, they found that, 'In order to reconstitute the self on divorce therefore, it was necessary for many women to disconnect themselves and to cease to be bound up with their former partners.'

Some women were intimidated by their former husbands, and some had been victims of violence. Many remained in what had been the marital home and their former partners would show little respect for the idea that it was now the woman's space. For example, one of the women studied, Meg Johnson, initially tried allowing her husband to look after their children in the marital home at weekends while she stayed at her mother's. However, she soon tired of this arrangement because she felt she didn't have her own independence or space. Indeed, Smart and Neale comment: 'issues of space and independence were a common theme for very many of the mothers'. They go on to say: 'Women's sense of powerlessness seemed to be embedded in their inability to become their "own" person once again.'

The situation was rather different for men. None of them expressed concern about lack of independence or space or felt this was hindering them from establishing a new identity. Nevertheless, they did experience a sense of powerlessness and frustration. 'Many of the fathers in our sample experienced having to negotiate with their ex-wives as demeaning and as a tangible sign of their powerlessness.' What troubled them was not their loss of an independent identity, but their loss of power over others. They were no longer able to exercise the same degree of control over their ex-wives as they had done when they were married to them.

Power

Smart and Neale use these arguments to distinguish between **debilitative powerlessness** and **situational powerlessness**. They define debilitative powerlessness as 'an effacement of the self' – the loss of a sense of control over one's own identity and destiny. This was the sort of powerlessness most usually experienced by women. They defined situational powerlessness as something 'which is experienced as an inability to control others and a denial of rights'.

Although both types of powerlessness could be experienced by men or women, the latter type was most commonly experienced by men because the children usually lived with the mother, at least for most of the week. Furthermore, Smart and Neale argue that debilitative powerlessness is ignored in public debates, whereas men have succeeded in putting situational powerlessness on the agenda of public debate and political discussion. 'Men's rights' (or their lack of them) in relation to children after divorce have been highlighted in the media and elsewhere, while the difficulties women face in feeling free of their former partner are not usually recognized.

Family practices

In this aspect of their work, then, Smart and Neale accept much of Giddens's arguments about identity and the changing nature of relationships, but they criticize him for

assuming that men and women face the same problems. To Smart and Neale, the experience of divorce is gendered; it is different for men and women.

In other aspects of their work, Smart and Neale express approval for Morgan's ideas and illustrate some of his points. Like Morgan, they argue that family life should be seen in terms of 'family practices'. Research into families should focus on what goes on in families and recognize that they change, although certain patterns of activity may be common and may be repeated frequently.

To Smart and Neale, it is fruitless to try to analyse 'the family' as a static entity. Relationships and patterns of family life are flexible and change. Nowhere is this more evident than in family relationships after divorce, especially since legislation has made it unlikely that there will be a clean break between divorcing parents.

The biological father continues to play a part in family life, even when he lives apart from his former spouse and children. Social fathers (the new partners of divorced mothers) have little formal role or responsibility for their new partner's children, but obviously have an important role within the household and an important relationship with the mother.

Grandparents may also have a role. Sometimes the grandparents from the father's side will have more contact with the children than the father himself. A father in one household may have important attachments to children in another. All this means that 'the family' is no longer a single entity based on common residence in one household. Instead, there are 'fragments of families spread across a number of households'.

Smart and Neale go on to argue that 'Divorce will inevitably come to mean something different – less an end to marriage and more the start of a set of relationships based on parenthood.' In addition, they note that the increasing frequency of gay and lesbian parenting and new reproductive technologies (such as surrogate motherhood) will lead to further complexity in family and household relationships. They conclude that these changes

will produce a very different spatial dimension in family connections and brings us directly back to David Morgan's concept of family practices. As Morgan has argued, we need increasingly to think in terms of 'doing' family life rather than in terms of 'being' in a family or part of an institution called a family. Smart and Neale, 1999

Judith Stacey – the postmodern family

The shift to the postmodern family

Unlike Giddens, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, and Morgan, the American sociologist Judith Stacey (1996) believes contemporary societies such as the USA have developed the **postmodern family**. Like the other writers examined in this section, she associates changes in the family with a movement away from a single dominant family type and with greater variety in family relationships. She says, 'I use the term postmodern family ... to signal the contested, ambivalent, and undecided character of our contemporary family cultures.' She goes on: 'Like postmodern culture,

contemporary Western family arrangements are diverse, fluid, and unresolved. Like postmodern cultural forms, our families today admix unlikely elements in an improvisational pastiche of old and new.'

Stacey does not see the emergence of the postmodern family as another stage in the development of family life; instead, it has destroyed the idea that the family progresses through a series of logical stages. It no longer makes sense to discuss what type of family is dominant in contemporary societies because family forms have become so diverse. Furthermore, there can be no assumption that any particular form will become accepted as the main, best or normal type of family.

Stacey believes this situation is here to stay. It will be impossible for societies to go back to having a single standard (such as the heterosexual nuclear family) against which all families are compared and judged. Societies will have to come to terms with such changes and adapt to cope with the greater variety and uncertainty in family life.

Although some commentators deplore the decline of the conventional, heterosexual nuclear family, diversity is here to stay. Social attitudes and social policies will have to adjust to this diversity if postmodern families are to have a good chance of facilitating fulfilling lives for their members.

Postmodern families in Silicon Valley

Stacey's claim that the postmodern family is characteristic of the USA is based upon her own research into family life in Silicon Valley, conducted during the mid-1980s. Silicon Valley in California is the 'global headquarters of the electronics industry and the world's vanguard post-industrial region' (Stacey, 1996). Usually, trends in family life in the USA take on an exaggerated form in Silicon Valley. For example, divorce rates in this area have risen faster than in other areas of the country. Trends there are generally indicative of future trends elsewhere.

Most sociologists have tended to argue that higher-class and middle-class families lead the way in new family trends and that working-class families then follow later (see, for example, Willmott and Young's idea of the symmetrical family, p. 477). Stacey's research suggests the reverse might be true with the rise of the postmodern family. Her research focused on two working-class extended-kin networks in Silicon Valley, and uncovered the way in which these families had become adaptable and innovative in response to social changes.

According to Stacey, the modern family was largely based around the idea of the male as the primary breadwinner, earning a 'family wage'. In other words, the man earned enough to keep the whole of the family. However, this sort of family life only became available to working-class families relatively late in the twentieth century. It was not until the 1960s that some working-class men started earning enough to keep a whole family. Furthermore, the situation was to be short-lived. By the late 1970s, economic changes began to threaten the viability of families dependent on a working-class male wage earner.

The two central people in the two kinship networks studied by Stacey's research were Pam and Dotty: working-class women who had to adapt their family life to changing personal circumstances and the changing society that surrounded them.

Both Pam and Dotty got married to manual workers around the end of the 1950s and the start of the 1960s. Both their husbands were of working-class origin, but both worked hard and worked their way up in the electronics industry until they had middle-class jobs. Despite this, neither husband was earning enough to maintain their family in the sort of middle-class lifestyle they desired. Pam took on some cleaning and childcare work, but she kept it a secret from her husband to avoid injuring his male pride in being the sole breadwinner. Dotty took on a range of temporary and low-paid jobs.

In the early 1970s Pam and Dotty both started courses at their local college – courses designed to give them a chance of getting better work. At the college they were exposed to feminist ideas for the first time and this encouraged them to take steps to change their marriages and family life. Both were unhappy with aspects of their marriage. Both husbands took little part in family life and were unwilling to help with housework. Dotty's husband, Lou, physically abused her. For these reasons both women left their husbands.

Pam got divorced, studied for a degree, and pursued a career working for social services. Some time later Pam became a born-again Christian and remarried. Her second marriage was a more egalitarian one and her family network was far from conventional. In particular, she formed a close relationship with her first husband's live-in lover and they helped each other out in a range of practical ways.

Dotty eventually took her husband back, but only after he had had a serious heart attack which left him unable to abuse her physically. Furthermore, the reconciliation was largely on Dotty's terms and her husband had to carry out most of the housework. Dotty meanwhile got involved in political campaigns in the community, particularly those concerned with helping battered wives. Later, she withdrew from political campaigning and took part-time work in an insurance office. Her husband and two of her adult children died. One of her deceased daughters left four children behind and Dotty successfully obtained custody of the children, against the wishes of her son-in-law, who had abused members of his family. Dotty then formed a household with one of her surviving daughters, who was a single mother.

These complex changes in the families of Pam and Dotty showed how two working-class women developed their family life to take account of changes in their circumstances in a rapidly changing environment. Stacey comments that by the end of the study, 'Dotty and Pamela both had moved partway back from feminist fervour, at the same time both had moved further away from the (no longer) modern family'. Furthermore, none of Pam's or Dotty's daughters lived in a conventional, modern nuclear family.

The working class and the postmodern family

Stacey found that the image of working-class families clinging on to conventional family arrangements longer than the middle class was quite erroneous. She says: 'I found postmodern family arrangements among blue collar workers at least as diverse and innovative as those found within the middle-class.'

The women she studied had drawn upon the tradition of working-class and African American women being supported by their female kin (such as mothers, daughters, sisters and aunts) to find new ways of dealing with the changes to their family circumstances. In post-industrial conditions, when jobs were less secure and workers were expected to work 'flexibly', women drew on such traditions to find ways of coping with uncertainty and change. Stacey says the working-class women she studied were:

Struggling creatively, often heroically, to sustain oppressed families and, to escape the most oppressive ones, they drew on 'traditional' premodern kinship resources and crafted untraditional ones. In the process they created postmodern family strategies.

Rising divorce and cohabitation rates, working mothers, two-earner households, single and unwed parenthood, along with inter-generational female-linked extended kin support networks appeared earlier and more extensively among poor and working-class people. Stacey, 1996

Gay and lesbian families

Stacey argues that gay and lesbian families have also played a pioneering role in developing the postmodern family. In the early 1970s gay and lesbian organizations were often strongly anti-family, but by the late 1980s this attitude had been reversed. There was a major 'gay-by boom' – that is, a boom in babies and children being looked after by gay and lesbian couples.

Stacey quotes research which suggests that by the late 1980s, 6–14 million children were being brought up in gay and lesbian families. Gay and lesbian families are themselves extremely diverse, but because of the prejudice they sometimes face they form a 'new embattled, visible and necessarily self-conscious, genre of postmodern kinship' (Stacey, 1996).

Furthermore, 'self-consciously "queer" couples and families, by necessity, have had to reflect much more seriously on the meaning and purpose of their intimate relationships'. This forced reflection makes them more creative and imaginative in developing family forms to suit their circumstances, and it makes them more likely to include people from outside conventional nuclear family relationships in their family circle. Stacey believes:

Gays and lesbians improvisationally assemble a patchwork of blood and intentional relations – gay, straight, and other – into creative, extended kin bonds. Gay communities more adeptly integrate single individuals into their social worlds than does the mainstream heterosexual society, a social skill quite valuable in a world in which divorce, widowhood and singlehood are increasingly normative. Stacey, 1996

Within this creativity and flexibility, gay and lesbian couples have increasingly asserted a right to claim, if they wish, aspects of more conventional family relationships for themselves. This has involved, for example, claiming custody of children, lesbian women intentionally becoming pregnant so that they can raise a child with their partner, and trying to have same-sex marriages legally recognized. Slowly, they have made gains on all these fronts, although at the time Stacey was writing same-sex marriage had not become legal in the USA. (A court case over the legality of same-sex marriage was pending in Hawaii.)

Stacey argues that research indicates that gay and lesbian relationships are at least as suitable for raising children as heterosexual marriages. Generally, research finds there is virtually no difference in the psychological well-being and social development of children with gay or lesbian carers and those with heterosexual carers. Stacey says: 'The rare small differences reported tend to favour gay parents, portraying them as somewhat more nurturant and tolerant, and their children in turn, more tolerant and empathetic, and less aggressive than those raised by non-gay parents.'

Stacey believes children raised in gay and lesbian families are less likely to be hostile to homosexual relationships and more likely to try them for themselves. However, she regards this as an advantage rather than a problem. This is because it discourages intolerance of families who are different, and in a world of increasing family diversity this is essential. It also allows people more freedom to explore and develop their sexuality, free from

what Adrienne Rich has called 'compulsory heterosexuality' (quoted in Stacey, 1996).

Conclusion

Stacey does not believe the development of the postmodern family has no disadvantages. She acknowledges that it creates a certain degree of unsettling instability. Nevertheless, she generally welcomes it as an opportunity to develop more egalitarian and more democratic family relationships.

As we have seen earlier in the chapter (see pp. 494–5, for example), it is questionable how far the undoubted diversification of families has supplanted more conventional families. It is possible that Stacey exaggerates the extent of change. Neither gay and lesbian families nor families in Silicon Valley are likely to be typical American families or typical of families in Britain and elsewhere.

Summary and conclusions

Many of the earliest sociological attempts to understand families and households were from a functionalist perspective. They tended to assume that the family was a basic, universal institution of society. They accepted that family life changed as society evolved, but believed that in any one era a single family type, which met the needs of society and individuals, would be dominant.

Arguably, functionalism had an idealized and romanticized view of the family. Certainly, sociological research and theorizing have challenged the assumptions on which functionalism was based. Marxists and feminists, amongst others, have questioned whether the family can be seen as functional for individuals and for society. They have highlighted what they see as exploitative and abusive aspects of family life such as the unpaid work of women and domestic violence.

Increasingly, theoretical approaches to the family, such as difference feminism and postmodernism, have emphasized the variety of family types and living arrangements that exist in contemporary society. By and large, they have

welcomed these changes as offering increased freedom and choice for individuals.

Research certainly confirms that nuclear family households are becoming less common in Britain and similar societies, and that households and families are becoming more diverse. Not everybody welcomes these trends, as some see them as threatening the stability of society by undermining an essential institution, the family.

Political and sociological debate about the family reflects the division of opinion about family change, with issues such as lone-parent families, gay 'marriage' and the use of new reproductive technologies attracting controversy. Whether the changes are regarded as desirable or not, most sociologists accept that important changes are taking place which reflect broader changes in society as a whole. Changes in family and household structure may well reflect changes in the nature of relationships within families and changes in the expectations that people bring to marriage, family life and cohabitation.

For weblinks, further resources and activities relating to this chapter, visit the companion website at:

www.haralambosholborn.com