Chapter 8

Families and households

Introduction

The family has often been regarded as the cornerstone of society. In pre-modern 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 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 have all suggested that individuals may be 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 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 were seen as both a symptom and a cause of instability and insecurity in people's lives and in society as a whole. This view was advocated by traditionalists who wanted a return to the ideal of the nuclear family. For them, many of society's problems were a result of the increased family instability.

Some postmodernists have begun to 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 to 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 an 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 co-operation 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 that:

> *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 12 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 he was the biological parent or not, 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.

The causes of matrifocal families

Matrifocal families are common in low-income black communities in the New World. In the USA in 1985, 51 per cent of all black children lived with their mothers but not with their fathers. The percentage is also high in other New World societies. For example, Nancie González (1970), in her study of Livingston, Honduras in 1956, found that 45 per cent of black Carib families had female heads. (See pp. 545–6 for comments on lone parenthood and ethnicity in Britain.)

The high level of matrifocal families has been seen as a result of one or more of the following factors:

1 Melville J. Herskovits (1958) argued that the West African origin of New World blacks influenced their family structure. In traditional West Africa, a system of polygyny (a form of extended family with one husband and two or more wives) and considerable female economic independence meant that the husband played a relatively marginal role in family life. Herskovits maintained that this pattern continues to influence black family life.
2 A second argument sees the system of plantation slavery as a major factor accounting for matrifocal families. M.G. Smith (1962) noted that, under slavery, the mother and children formed the basic family unit. Families were often split with the sale of one or more of their members, but mothers and dependent children were usually kept together. The authority of the male as head of the family was eroded because he was subject to the authority of the plantation owner who, with his white employees, had the right of sexual access to all female slaves. Formed under slavery, the model of the matrifocal family is seen to have persisted.
3 A third argument sees the economic position of blacks in the New World as the basic cause of the matrifocal family. Elliot Liebow (1967), whose views are outlined in Chapter 5 (pp. 321–3), saw female-

headed families as resulting from desertion by the husband because he has insufficient funds to play the role of father and breadwinner.

4 A final argument accepts that poverty is the basic cause of matrifocal families but states also that matrifocality has become a part of the subculture of the poor. This view is contained in Oscar Lewis's concept of the culture of poverty (Lewis, 1961). From his research in a low-income black area of Washington DC, Ulf Hannerz (1969) argued that female-headed families are so common that to some degree they have become an expected and accepted alternative to the standard nuclear family. According to this argument, matrifocal families are not simply a product of poverty but also of culture. (See Chapter 5, pp. 319–23, for a general discussion of the relationship between poverty, culture and family structure.)

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? In order to decide this, we will first consider the arguments that support Murdock, and then the arguments against him.

Support for Murdock

1 Statistically, the female-headed family is not the norm either within black communities or in the societies in which they are set.

2 The matrifocal family is often a nuclear family that has been broken. Particularly in the USA, it is usually a product of separation or divorce. It did not begin life as a matrifocal family.

3 Some sociologists believe that the mainstream model of the nuclear family is valued by blacks and regarded as the ideal.

4 Many sociologists view the female-headed family as a family 'gone wrong', as a product of social disorganization and not, therefore, as a viable alternative to the nuclear family. It has been accused of producing maladjusted children, juvenile delinquents and high-school dropouts. Since it does not appear to perform the functions of a 'proper family', it is regarded as a broken family and not as a viable unit in its own right.

Arguments against Murdock

The following arguments support the view that the matrifocal family should be recognized as an alternative to the nuclear family:

1 Simply because in statistical terms the matrifocal family is not the norm, does not mean it cannot be recognized as an alternative family structure. In many societies that practise polygyny, polygynous marriages are in the minority, yet sociologists accept them as a form of extended family.

2 As Hannerz (1969) argued, in low-income black communities matrifocal families are to some extent expected and accepted.

3 Members of matrifocal families regard the unit as a family.

4 The matrifocal family should not be seen simply as a broken nuclear family. 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. González states that 'By dispersing her loyalties and by clinging especially to the unbreakable sibling ties with her brothers, a woman increases her chances of maintaining her children and household.' In a situation of poverty, 'the chances that any one man may fail are high.'

5 The supposed harmful effects on the children of the matrifocal family are far from proven (see pp. 541–4 for a discussion of lone parenthood).

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. She says:

> *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, p. 30

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'. The primary carer may get help from female relatives, childminders, nannies, or from their husbands or male partners. Sheeran does not therefore deny that men play some part in childcare, but she does deny that their role is as important as that of women. She is sceptical of claims by some sociologists that men's involvement

in childcare in Britain has greatly increased (see the discussion of the symmetrical family, pp. 529–31, for an example of such a view).

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. According to figures quoted by her from the *General Household Survey* of 1989–90, about 13 per cent of British households consisted of a lone mother with dependent children, and about 2 per cent of lone fathers with dependent children. Mukti Jain Campion, writing in 1995, notes that figures indicated that at that time there were in the region of 100,000 lone fathers in Britain and about 1.5 million in the USA. 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. 541–4).

Gay families

Another type of household that may contradict Murdock's claims about the universality of the family, as defined by him, is gay and lesbian households. 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, 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 rather more common than gay fathers, due to the difficulties gay men are likely to have in being granted custody or given adopted children. However, Mukti Jain Campion quotes a study which claimed that over 1,000 children were born to gay or lesbian couples in San Francisco between 1985 and 1990, and that there were many more people living with gay partners who had conceived children in heterosexual relationships. Thus, while households consisting of gay partners and one or more children may not be very common, they do exist. 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) argues that such households should still be seen as families. He argues that, if marriage were available, many gay and lesbian couples would marry. Furthermore, he believes that the relationships involved are no different in any fundamental way from those in heterosexual households. Callahan therefore claims 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 concludes, '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).

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 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' (Gittins, 1993).

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

The analysis of the family from a functionalist perspective involves three main questions:

1 First, 'What are the functions of the family?' Answers to this question deal with the contributions made by the family to the maintenance of the social system. It is assumed that society has certain functional prerequisites or basic needs that must be met if it is to survive and operate efficiently. The family is examined in terms of the degree to which it meets these functional prerequisites.
2 A second and related question asks 'What are the functional relationships between the family and other parts of the social system?'
3 It is assumed that there must be a certain degree of fit, integration and harmony between the parts of the social system if society is going to function efficiently. For example, the family must be integrated to some extent with the economic system. We will examine this question in detail in a later section when the relationships between the family and industrialization are considered.

The third question deals with the functions performed by an institution or a part of society for the individual. In the case of the family, this question considers the functions of the family for its individual members.

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 goes a long way to fulfilling 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 provides a 'conception of the family's many-sided utility and thus of its inevitability'. He concluded that '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 notes in his criticism, Murdock does not answer 'to what extent these basic functions are inevitably linked with the institution of the nuclear family' (Morgan, 1975).

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.

Unless culture is 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 that 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. 524–5) (see also Chapter 3, p. 132), 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 D.H.J. 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- and working-class families, or different family structures in ethnic minority 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 clearcut boundaries can be established (see pp. 581–2). The family as such cannot therefore be seen as performing any particular functions on its own in isolation from other institutions.

Critical views of the family

The view that the family benefits both its members and society as a whole has come under strong attack. Some observers have suggested that, on balance, the family may well be dysfunctional both for society and its individual members. This criticism has mainly been directed at the family in Western industrial society.

Edmund Leach – *A Runaway World?*

In a lecture entitled *A Runaway World?* (1967) Edmund Leach presented a pessimistic view of the family in industrial society. Leach, an anthropologist, had spent many years studying small-scale pre-industrial societies. In such societies the family often forms a part of a wider kinship unit. An extensive network of social relationships between a large number of kin provides practical and psychological support for the individual. This support is reinforced by the closely-knit texture of relationships in the small-scale community as a whole.

By comparison, in modern industrial society, the nuclear family is largely isolated from kin and the wider community. Leach summarizes this situation and its consequences as follows:

> *In the past kinsfolk and neighbours gave the individual continuous moral support throughout his life. Today the domestic household is isolated. The family looks inward upon itself; there is an intensification of emotional stress between husband and wife and parents and children. The strain is greater than most of us can bear.*
>
> Leach, 1967

Thrown back almost entirely upon its own resources, the nuclear family becomes like an overloaded electrical circuit. The demands made upon it are too great and fuses blow. In their isolation, family members expect and demand too much from each other. The result is conflict. In Leach's words, 'The parents and children huddled together in their loneliness take too much out of each other. The parents fight; the children rebel.'

The family and society

Problems are not confined to the family. The tension and hostility produced within the family find expression throughout society. Leach argued that the 'isolation and the close-knit nature of contemporary family life incubates hate which finds expression in conflict in the wider community'. The families in which people huddle together create barriers between them and the wider society. The privatized family breeds suspicion and fear of the outside world. Leach argued that 'Privacy is the source of fear and violence. The violence in the world comes about because we human beings are forever creating barriers between men who are like us and men who are not like us.'

Only when individuals can break out of the prison of the nuclear family, rejoin their fellows and give and receive support will the ills of society begin to diminish. Leach's conclusion is diametrically opposed to the functionalist view of the family. He stated that 'Far from being the basis of the good society, the family, with its narrow privacy and tawdry secrets, is the source of all our discontents.'

R.D. Laing – *The Politics of the Family*

In *The Politics of the Family* (1976) and a number of other publications (for example, Laing and Esterson, 1970, Laing, 1971), R.D. Laing presented a radical alternative to the functionalist picture of the 'happy family'. Laing was a phenomenological psychiatrist: he was concerned with interaction within the family and the meanings that develop in that context. His work was largely based on the study of families in which one member has been defined as schizophrenic.

Laing argues that the behaviour of so-called schizophrenics can only be understood in terms of relationships within the family. Far from viewing schizophrenia as madness, he argues that it makes sense in terms of the meanings and interactions that develop within the family. As such it can be seen as reasonable behaviour.

Laing maintains that the difference between so-called 'normal' and 'abnormal' families is small. It therefore follows that a lot can be learned about families in general by studying those labelled as abnormal.

Exploitation in the family

Laing views the family in terms of sets of interactions. Individuals form alliances, adopt various strategies and play one or more individuals off against others in a complex tactical game. Laing is preoccupied with those interaction situations that he regards as harmful and destructive. Throughout his work he concentrates on the exploitative aspects of family relationships. The following example illustrates his approach (Laing, 1971).

Jane is defined as schizophrenic. She is in a perpetual reverie, her own little dream world, which consists of a game of tennis. It is a mixed doubles match; she is the ball. Jane sits motionless and silent and eats only when fed. The adults in the family are in a state of conflict, her father and his mother being ranged against her mother and her mother's father. The two halves of the family communicate only through Jane; she is the go-between. The strain eventually becomes too much for her and she escapes into her dream world. However, as her 'dream' shows, even in this world she cannot escape from the clutches of the family. The game of tennis symbolizes the interaction patterns in the family.

With examples such as this, Laing shows how the family can be a destructive and exploitative institution.

Laing refers to the family group as a nexus. He argues that 'the highest concern of the nexus is reciprocal concern. Each partner is concerned about what the other thinks, feels, does' (Laing, 1962). Within the nexus there is a constant, unremitting demand for mutual concern and attention. As a result there is considerable potential for harm: family members are in an extremely vulnerable position.

Thus, if a father is ashamed of his son, given the nature of the nexus, his son is deeply affected. As he is emotionally locked into the nexus, he is concerned about his father's opinion and cannot brush it off lightly. In self-defence he may run to his mother who offers protection. In this way, Laing argues that 'A family can act as gangsters, offering each other mutual protection against each other's violence.'

Reciprocal interiorization

From interaction within the nexus, reciprocal interiorization develops: family members become a part of each other and the family as a whole. They interiorize or internalize the family. Laing argues that 'To be in the same family is to feel the same "family" inside' (Laing, 1971). The example of Jane illustrates this process – her little world is an interiorization of family interaction patterns.

Laing regards the process of interiorization as psychologically damaging since it restricts the development of the self. Individuals carry the blueprint of their family with them for the rest of their life. This prevents any real autonomy or freedom of self; it prevents the development of the individual in his or her own right. Self-awareness is smothered under the blanket of the family. As a result of family interiorization, Laing states, 'I consider most adults (including myself) are or have been more or less in a hypnotic trance induced in early infancy' (Laing, 1971).

The family 'ghetto'

Like Leach, Laing argues that problems in the family create problems in society. Due to the nature of the nexus and the process of interiorization, a boundary or even a defensive barrier is drawn between the family and the world outside. This can reach the point where 'Some families live in perpetual anxiety of what, to them, is an external persecuting world. The members of the family live in a family ghetto as it were' (Laing, 1962). Laing argues that this is one reason for so-called maternal over-protection. However, 'It is not "over" protection from the mother's point of view, nor, indeed, often from the point of view of other members of the family.'

This perception of the external threat of a menacing society tends to unite and strengthen the nexus. The barrier erected between the family and the world outside may have important consequences. According to Laing, it leads family members, particularly children, to see the world in terms of 'us and them'. From this basic division stem the harmful and dangerous distinctions between Gentile and Jew, black and white, and the separation of others into 'people like us' and 'people like them'.

Within the family children learn to obey their parents. Laing regards this as the primary link in a dangerous chain. Patterns of obedience laid down in early childhood form the basis for obedience to authority in later life. They lead to soldiers and officials blindly and unquestioningly following orders. Laing implies that without family obedience training, people would question orders, follow their own judgement and make their own decisions. If this were so, American soldiers might not have

marched off to fight what Laing regards as a senseless war in Vietnam in the 1960s, and we might no longer live in a society which Laing believes is largely insane.

Despite Laing's preoccupation with the dark side of family life, he stated in an interview with David Cohen in 1977:

> *I enjoy living in a family. I think the family is still the best thing that still exists biologically as a natural thing. My attack on the family is aimed at the way I felt many children are subjected to gross forms of violence and violation of their rights, to humiliation at the hands of adults who don't know what they're doing.*
>
> Quoted in Cohen, 1977, pp. 216–17

Criticisms of Leach and Laing

Leach and Laing in their different ways have presented a radical alternative to the functionalist perspective on the family, but their work is open to a number of criticisms:

1 Neither has conducted detailed fieldwork on the family in contemporary industrial society and in fact Laing's research is limited to investigations of families in which one member has been defined as schizophrenic.
2 Both talk about 'the family' with little reference to its position in the social structure. For example, there is no reference to social class in Laing's work and therefore no indication of the relationship between class and family life.
3 Leach examined the family over time, but the work of Laing lacks any historical perspective.
4 Both authors examine the Western family from their particular specialized knowledge: Leach from his work on family and kinship in small-scale non-Western societies, and Laing from his study of schizophrenia and family life. This inevitably colours their views. In itself, this is not a criticism, but it is important to be aware of the source of their perspectives.
5 To some degree, Leach and Laing both begin with a picture of a society out of control or even gone mad. Leach, in *A Runaway World?* (1967), implies that society has got out of hand; Laing goes even further by suggesting that many aspects of contemporary society are insane. Such views of society will produce what many consider to be an extreme and unbalanced picture of the family. However, it is possible to accuse the functionalists of the opposite bias. For example, Parsons gave the impression of an immensely reasonable society ticking over like clockwork. In this context a well-adjusted, contented family is to be expected.

Leach and Laing have provided a balance to the functionalist view which has dominated sociological thinking on the family for many years. Laing, in particular, has given important insights into interaction patterns within the family. In doing so he may, as D.H.J. Morgan suggests, have come 'closer to family life as it is actually experienced than do many of the more orthodox presentations' (Morgan, 1975).

In the next section we will consider the Marxist view of the family.

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 that 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, the 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 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

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 erroneous interpretation of the evolution of the family by the nineteenth-century American anthropologist, Lewis Henry Morgan. Modern research has suggested that many of its details 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 argues that 'the general trend of Engels's argument still appears sound' (Gough, 1972). 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 like a large extended family. Gough argues that:

> *It is true that although it is not a group marriage in Engels's 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 3, p. 142.)

Eli Zaretsky – personal life and capitalism

Eli Zaretsky (1976) has analysed more recent developments in the family 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 that 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 that 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 that 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.

Next we will examine the family from a feminist viewpoint.

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 Laing, Leach and 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 and have emphasized the different experiences of women in families. Some have rejected the idea that there is such a thing as 'the family' rather than simply different domestic arrangements. They have, however, continued to identify ways in which domestic life can disadvantage women.

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 have acknowledged that women are exploited in marriage and family life but they have emphasized 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 3, pp. 148–50.)

The production of labour power

Margaret Benston stated that:

> *The amount of unpaid labor 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 labor 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 that:

> *As an economic unit, the nuclear family is a valuable stabilizing force in capitalist society. Since the production which is done in the home is paid for by the husband–father's earnings, 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, p. 233

Kathy McAfee and Myrna Wood make a similar point in their discussion of male dominance in the family. They claim that 'The petty dictatorship which most men exercise over their wives and families enables them to vent their anger and frustration in a way which poses no challenge to the system' (quoted in Rowbotham, 1973).

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 argues that the family is 'an ideological conditioning device in an exploitive society' (Cooper 1972). 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.

(Marxist views on the role of the family in capitalist society mirror Marxist analysis of the role of education – see Chapter 11.)

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 D.H.J. Morgan 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' (Morgan, 1975). 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, difference feminists are more prepared to accept that there may be some positive advantages for some women, in some families.

Radical feminist perspectives on the family

There are many varieties of radical feminism. As Valerie Bryson says, 'the radical feminist label has been applied in recent years to a confusingly diverse range of theories' (Bryson, 1992). She says 'it is the site for far ranging disagreements at all levels of theory and practice'. However, Bryson does identify some key characteristics which distinguish radical feminists from other feminists:

1 'It is essentially a theory of, by and for women' and therefore 'sees no need to compromise with existing perspectives and agendas'. Radical feminist ideas tend to be novel rather than adaptations of other theories such as Marxism.
2 'It 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 to 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 one major radical feminist theory of the family.

Christine Delphy and Diana Leonard – *Familiar Exploitation*

Types of feminism

Delphy and Leonard (1992) are unlike most radical feminists in that they attach considerable importance to material factors in causing women's oppression. In this respect they 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. They say:

> *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, nor because they are ideologically conditioned into subservience, but because their work is appropriated within the family. Delphy and Leonard argue that 'It is primarily the *work* women do, the uses to which our bodies can be put, which constitutes the reason for our oppression.'

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 dependents or helpers. Family households have members who are connected by kinship or marriage. Female heads of household are uncommon. Figures indicate that only about one in ten adult women in Britain aged 16 to 60 heads a household. Most of these women are single or widows and there are no other adults present. Only one in 25 women aged 16 to 60 heads a household which contains other adults. Where a male adult relative is present it is usually he who takes over as head of household. In the case of married women, even if she has the main income and owns the house, 'she is at least semi-subordinate, owing her husband respect and obedience and having responsibility for domestic (and sexual and emotional) labour'.

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 dependents, are not related to the amount of work done. A man must provide for his dependents' 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 more related 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 that 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.' The male heads have to find informal ways of motivating their workers and, if possible, 'foster their subordinates' feelings of affection for them'.

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 dependents, 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.

Domestic labour

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 that such tasks are usually done by women. They claim that 'time-budget studies show ... that the amount of time women spend on domestic work has not declined this

century and they still do twice as much each day as men in all western and eastern bloc countries even when they have paid employment'. Furthermore, there is 'a clear order of responsibility to care for children, the sick and elderly'. This responsibility always falls on female relatives, where they are available, except in special circumstances (for example, if the wife is disabled).

On the other hand, when men marry, they end up doing only half the housework they did as bachelors. However much they may decide to 'help' their wives, husbands do not assume responsibility for housework.

Supporting husbands

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, proofreading books if their husband is an author, 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. They find it 'psychologically, socially or legally impossible' to work under their wives' direction. They might give some assistance to working wives, but the husband's career remains the central one.

Consumption

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. 79–81 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.

Although the studies did not always contain the data needed to test their theories, they found support for their arguments in a number of areas. The following are a few examples:

1 In Bristol, the researchers found that husbands did not want their wives to take paid employment and often discouraged them from doing so. Wives had little influence on their husbands' patterns of work.

2 In Port Talbot, most men strongly resisted doing housework, even though they were unemployed. They saw redundancy as a threat to their masculinity and did not want it further undermined by doing 'women's' jobs in the house. Only 25 per cent of the sample gave more than occasional help with housework and in no case did the husband take the main burden of housework. The Port Talbot study also found that the husband usually retained control of the family finances.

3 Delphy's research revealed that wives' labour was vital to the success of French farms. Farms owned by bachelors enjoyed considerably less success than those owned by married men. Nevertheless, wives had little autonomy and were given the 'arduous, least-valued tasks'. Wives had very little say in how the farm was run and farms were usually handed down to sons.

Conclusion and summary

Delphy and Leonard believe that 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 husband's dominance – they are not always passive victims – but 'economic and social constraints' make it difficult for women to escape from the patriarchal family.

Delphy and Leonard do not think that there are simple solutions to the problems created by the family. Individual men may love their wives, but that does not stop them from exploiting them. Single mothers cannot escape from patriarchy 'because they are often poor and their situation is always difficult'. Lesbians 'may be downright ostracized and physically attacked'. In the end, they admit that they do not know what strategy feminists should use to change the family, but they believe that women should continue to struggle to improve their lives, both inside and outside family life.

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. They fail to acknowledge that there may be some families in which power is shared. It may well be possible to find inequalities in every household, but that does not necessarily mean that one person is dominant. Ironically, they make similar, false assumptions to those found in the work of the functionalist George Peter Murdock (see pp. 504–6).

2 Empirically, their work is based upon unrepresentative data. The three British studies used are all of manual workers, and two of them are rather dated. Most researchers have found less gender inequality in middle-class families than in working-class families, so these studies may have an in-built bias towards supporting their theory. Furthermore, they were not specifically directed at testing Delphy and Leonard's theory. The relevant data are often therefore absent from the research.

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.

Laura M. Purdy – 'Babystrike!'

Feminism and motherhood

Like Delphy and Leonard, Laura M. Purdy (1997) believes that women are disadvantaged and exploited in family relationships. Unlike Delphy and Leonard, she believes that these disadvantages largely result from childcare responsibilities rather than from material inequalities. Purdy argues that in recent years feminists have placed less emphasis on criticisms of families and marriage, while issues such as pornography and sexual harassment have come to be seen as more important. She says, 'critiques of marriage and family seem almost forgotten as feminists, like society at large, now seem generally to assume that all women – including lesbians – will pair up and have children'. Some recent accounts of the family in the popular media suggest that it is possible for women to 'have it all'. They can combine a successful career with a rewarding family life and successful and satisfying child-rearing. Purdy questions whether it is really possible to 'have it all' and whether family life in general, and child-rearing in particular, are really the paths to female self-fulfilment.

Purdy suggests that it is generally assumed that women should want to form couples (whether heterosexual or lesbian) and have children. Couples who choose not to have children are thought of as eccentric and selfish. Young women never 'hear that some people shouldn't have children, either because they don't really want them, because they are not able to care for them well, or because they have other projects that are incompatible with good child-rearing'. Purdy believes that feminism should try to counter the assumption that having children is necessarily desirable.

The disadvantages of motherhood

According to Purdy, there are a number of disadvantages for women in having children. Having children is extremely expensive and can increase the burden of poverty on women who are already poor. Having children represents a commitment for women for the rest of their lives, and a particularly onerous commitment during the first 18 years. According to an American study quoted by Purdy, men still do only 20 per cent of domestic work, despite big increases in female employment. This makes it very difficult for women to compete on equal terms in the labour

market or to try to fight for greater equality. She asks, 'How can women energetically fight the entrenched sexism in society and pursue positions of power and prestige if their time and energy is mostly taken up with children's needs, needs that cannot and ought not be ignored?'

Purdy believes that society in general takes it for granted that women will have children and therefore perform the vital function of reproducing the species. The only way to bring home to men the sacrifices of child-rearing is for women to stop having children. In other words, Purdy advocates a babystrike. Only then would men take women's demands for equality within families seriously. Only then would social arrangements change so that women were able to combine having children with successful careers.

Evaluation

The idea of a babystrike is a novel suggestion for focusing male attention on the disadvantages suffered by women. Purdy makes an important point in drawing attention to the particular problems posed for women by the responsibilities of childcare. However, she places perhaps too much emphasis on one factor – that of child-rearing – in creating and perpetuating women's disadvantages in families. Other feminists, perhaps with some justification, would not accept that children are the only, or even the main, reason for women being unequal within families. They certainly would not accept that women only start to suffer inequality once they have children. Like a number of other theorists of the family, Purdy may exaggerate the effects of one particular source of inequality while neglecting others.

Difference feminism

Neither Marxist nor radical feminism is 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.

Increasingly, however, feminists have begun to highlight the differences between groups of women in different family situations. Thus, they have argued that women in single-parent families are in a different situation 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 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 (see pp. 136–9), Marxist feminism and radical feminism. Their work often has affinities with postmodern theories of the family (see pp. 582–4) and with ideas relating to family diversity (see pp. 537–49). However, they share a sufficiently distinctive approach to be considered a separate feminist perspective on the family.

Michèlle 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 Michèlle Barrett and Mary McIntosh (1982). Their work was influenced by Marxist feminism but moves beyond the kinds of Marxist feminist views discussed earlier (see pp. 514–15). 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 pp. 537–49.) 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 do believe that 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 the handicapped could be far more stimulating for, say, Down's syndrome sufferers, if it were not for life in institutions being devalued by the ideology of the family.

Like other feminists, they 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 that 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 pp. 524–5). 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.

According to Nicholson, the nuclear family is a comparatively recent phenomenon. It first developed among upper classes in the eighteenth century. For middle-class groups this type of family only became popular in the nineteenth century. Working-class people often aspired to form nuclear families in the nineteenth century, but their low income usually prevented them from doing so. They frequently had to share accommodation with others from outside the nuclear family. Indeed, it was not really until the 1950s and the post-Second World War boom that nuclear family households became the norm for working-class families. Thus Nicholson argues that the conventional family is actually a very recent phenomenon for most people.

However, even in the 1950s, some groups lacked the resources to form nuclear families. This was the case for people with few or outdated skills and for many African Americans who were the victims of racism in the labour market.

Alternative families

Alternative family forms were already developing even before the traditional family reached its zenith. Nicholson says that:

> *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 labor 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, p. 35

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 and their partners 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 that '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 advantages and 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 under strong requirements 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 that 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 develops a type of difference feminism influenced by postmodernism (Calhoun, 1997). 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.

Calhoun argues that feminist theories have generally neglected sexual orientation as a source of oppression distinct from gender oppression. However, Nicholson believes that sexual orientation can be an important source of oppression and that family ideology contributes to that oppression.

Conventional feminist views

Calhoun starts by noting conventional feminist views on the family. Such views see the family as an important source of female oppression for a variety of reasons. These include the ways in which families make women financially dependent upon men, the way family ideology encourages women to put the family before their own interests, inequalities in the amount of domestic work done by men and women, and the way in which family ideology 'often masks gender injustice within the family including battery, rape and child abuse'.

Calhoun accepts that this sort of feminist analysis is accurate but says that 'This picture ... is not, in fact, a picture of *women's* relation to the family, but is more narrowly a picture of *heterosexual* women's relation to the family, marriage and mothering.' Lesbians who live outside heterosexual families can hardly be directly exploited by relationships within such families. Indeed lesbians are uniquely placed to avoid dependence on men within families. However, Calhoun does believe that they are disadvantaged by the ideology of the heterosexual family.

Some lesbian feminists have argued that lesbians should avoid forming families. They have argued that, because women are exploited in heterosexual marriages, marriage and family life are inevitably patriarchal. Similarly they have argued that, because mothering disadvantages heterosexual women – by, for example, limiting their opportunities in the labour market – lesbian women should also avoid becoming mothers. Calhoun disagrees. She believes that 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 that 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.

Crises of heterosexual families

Calhoun believes that there have been three historical periods when heterosexual families have been seen as in crisis and consequently gays and lesbians have become a focus of critical attention:

1 In the period from the 1880s to the 1920s, conventional heterosexual family life was challenged by early feminists who campaigned for greater legal rights for women, such as the right to institute divorce proceedings and the right for married women to own property. Some medical theorists attributed these campaigns to women who were too masculine. They developed 'a new gender category variously labelled the sexual invert, the intermediate sex, the third sex ... the man-woman'. This group of women was distinguished by masculine traits such as short hair, smoking and drinking, being aggressive and so on. Calhoun describes this category as 'the precursor to the contemporary categories "lesbian" and "homosexual"'. Most men were unable to accept that the challenge to male supremacy within the family could be mounted by normal women seeking greater equality, and so blamed it on women who deviated from conventional gender norms.
2 From the 1930s to the 1950s, the economic depression and the Second World War were the main sources of a crisis in heterosexual families. During the depression many men lost their jobs and, with it, their breadwinner role. There was also a drop in marriage rates. During the war there were long separations for many married couples, and divorce and desertion became much more common. To Calhoun, all of this represented a 'cultural crisis in masculinity'. With increasing numbers of men unable to sustain their masculinity through being the breadwinning heads of families, there was a 'shift in the cultural construction of masculinity from being gender-based to being sexuality-based'. The key aspect of masculinity now became being heterosexual, not being head of a family. The distinction between (desirable) heterosexuality and (undesirable) homosexuality was reinforced in panics about homosexual child molesters in the periods from 1937 to 1940 and from 1949 to 1955. Once again, a crisis in the heterosexual family was blamed on the corrupting influence of homosexual outsiders on conventional family life.
3 In the 1980s and 1990s a whole range of factors undermined heterosexual family life. These included rising divorce rates and single-parent families becoming so common that 'Father's Day cards now include ones addressed to mothers, and others announcing their recipients as "like a dad"'.

Extended kinship networks have become increasingly important for the urban poor, and the idea of the family headed by a heterosexual couple with their offspring has been undermined by new reproductive technology. Calhoun says:

> *Increasingly sophisticated birth control methods and technologically assisted reproduction using in-vitro fertilization, artificial insemination, contract pregnancy, fertility therapies, and the like undermine cultural understandings of the marital couple as a naturally reproductive unit, introduce nonrelated others into the reproductive process, and make it possible for women and men to have children without a heterosexual partner.*
>
> Calhoun, 1997, pp. 142–3

According to Calhoun, modern family life is essentially characterized by choice. Lesbians and gays introduced the idea of chosen families. You can choose who 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'. In Britain, for example, the Local Government Act of the late 1980s made illegal 'the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship' (quoted in Calhoun, 1997). Similarly, in 1990, the US Congress passed a law prohibiting the federal government from using funds to promote homosexuality.

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, p. 146

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.

This section has 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 p. 8 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 at the turn of the millennium from how they were two hundred years earlier.
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. 582–4).

Further difficulties arise from the fact that there is not one form of pre-industrial, or pre-modern, 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 pre-modern, 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, pre-modern 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* (Arensberg and Kimball, 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 all 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 Bale, 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.) 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. Individuals' 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, schoolteacher 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 pre-modern, pre-industrial societies. There, 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-orientated values of industrial society, the isolated nuclear family is the most suitable family structure. Any extension of this basic unit may 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.

William J. Goode

In *World Revolution and Family Patterns* (1963), William J. Goode surveyed the relationship between family structure and industrialization in various parts of the world. Like Parsons, he argued that industrialization tends to undermine the extended family and larger kinship groupings. Goode offered the following explanations for this process:

1 The high rate of geographical mobility in industrial society decreases 'the frequency and intimacy of contact among members of the kin network'.
2 The relatively high level of social mobility also tends to weaken kinship ties. If members of a working-class family become upwardly mobile, for example, they may adopt the lifestyle, attitudes and values of their new social class. This would tend to cut them off from their working-class kin.
3 Many of the functions once performed by the family have been taken over by outside agencies such as schools, business and welfare organizations. This reduces the dependency of individuals on their family and kin.
4 The importance of achieved status in industrial society means that the family and kinship group have less to offer their members. The family cannot guarantee its members a job or directly provide the necessary education and training to obtain one. The highly specialized division of labour in industrial society makes it even more difficult for an individual to obtain a job for a relative. As Goode states, 'He may not be in a suitable sector of the occupational sphere, or at a level where his influence is useful' (Goode, 1963).

Ideology and the nuclear family

However, Goode did not regard the pressures of industrialization as the only reason for the breakdown of extended family ties. He argued that the move to nuclear families had been 'far more rapid than could be supposed or predicted from the degree of industrialization alone'.

Goode believed that the ideology of the nuclear family had encouraged its growth, particularly in non-Western societies. This is due partly to the prestige of Western ideas and lifestyles. Since the nuclear family is found 'in many areas where the rate of industrialization is slight', Goode recognized 'the independent power of *ideological* variables'. He also argued that the spread of the nuclear family is due in part to the freedom it affords its members. In this type of family people owe fewer obligations to their kin.

The extended family and role bargaining

Goode applied the concept of role bargaining to his study of the family. This means that individuals attempt to obtain the best possible 'bargain' in their relationships with others. They will attempt to maximize their gains. In terms of family relationships, this means they will maintain relationships with kin and submit to their control if they feel they are getting a good return on their investment of time, energy and emotion.

With respect to the extended family and industrialization, Goode argued that 'It is not so much that the new system is incompatible, as it offers an alternative pattern of payments.' In other words, extended family patterns can operate in industrial society. Although it costs time and money, the rapid transport system in modern society means that 'the individual can maintain an extended kin network if he wishes to do so'. However, the 'alternative pattern of payments' offered by industrial society provides a better bargain for many people. They gain more by rejecting close and frequent contacts with kin beyond the nuclear family, than by retaining them.

Goode used the concept of role bargaining to explain social class differences in family structure. From his world survey, Goode found that extended family patterns are most likely to occur in the upper classes. Since members of ruling classes and elites have an important influence on appointments to top jobs, the retention of family ties makes economic sense. In Goode's terms, it is an effective role bargain. By comparison, members of the lower strata 'have little to offer the younger generation to counteract their normal tendency to independence'.

Goode concluded that extended kinship ties are retained if individuals feel they have more to gain than to lose by maintaining them.

Criticism of Parsons and Goode

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 writers such as Parsons and Goode as being well-adapted to the requirements of modern industrial societies. Furthermore, the nuclear family is generally portrayed in a positive light. David Cheal sees this view as being closely related to the modernist view of progress (Cheal, 1991).

Cheal describes modernism as 'a self-conscious commitment to, and advocacy of the world-changing potential of modernity'. Writers such as Parsons and Goode put forward a modernist interpretation of the family. Cheal attacks Parsons in particular.

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 like 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 employment 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 functioned well together. Furthermore, Cheal argues that:

> *Parsons's 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, p. 34

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 that neither was typical of those countries in the pre-industrial era.

Peter Laslett, a Cambridge historian, has studied family size and composition in pre-industrial England (Laslett, 1972a, 1972b, 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 that '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 began to draw together the results of research into pre-industrial family size in other countries (Laslett, 1983, 1984). 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 family type 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.

Family diversity in pre-industrial societies

Although Laslett has 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 referred to other research that 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, Michael 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. He states:

> *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, p. 77

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:

1 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.
2 The high death rate led to a large number of orphans, many of whom found a home with relatives. Again the situation benefited both parties. It provided support for the children who would soon, in an age of child labour, make an important contribution to household income.
3 A high rate of sickness and unemployment encouraged a wide network of kin as a means of mutual support: with no sickness and unemployment benefits, individuals were forced to rely on their kin in times of hardship.
4 Co-residence also provided direct economic advantages to those concerned. Additional members of the household would lower the share of the rent paid by each individual.
5 Finally, the practice of recruiting for jobs through kin encouraged the establishment of a wide kinship network. Anderson notes that the system of '"Asking for" a job for kin was normal in the factory towns and the employers used the kinship system to recruit labour from the country.'

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.

Elizabeth Roberts – family life and duty

Like Anderson, Elizabeth Roberts has studied family life in Lancashire (Roberts, 1984). She conducted a study of working-class women in three Lancashire towns: Preston, Barrow and Lancaster. The study used oral history techniques, interviewing people about their past lives, in order to examine family life between 1890 and 1940.

Like Anderson, Roberts found that extended kinship links remained very strong in working-class families, with family members helping each other out in many different ways. However, her findings differ from Anderson's in two important respects:

1 Roberts found evidence of a great deal of support being given by working-class women to family members in other households as well as to the family members with whom they lived.
2 She denies Anderson's claim that family relationships are largely based upon self-interest. Roberts found that women often gave practical, emotional and even financial support to other family members without getting or expecting much in return. Indeed, providing this help often cost the giver a good deal in time, effort and sometimes money. Roberts therefore argues that family relationships were based rather more on emotions and values than calculating self-interest. People helped their relatives because they felt affection or a sense of duty towards them, and not just because they had something to gain.

Evaluation

Janet Finch (1989) suggests a number of possible explanations for the differences in the findings of Roberts and Anderson:

1 Their studies refer to different time periods. Finch advances the possibility that family life had become less harsh and had stabilized by the end of the nineteenth century, giving people more opportunity to give unselfish support to their kin.
2 The differences could relate to gender. Roberts's study was based upon studies of women and it could be that women are more likely than men to have a strong sense of duty towards relatives.
3 The differences could be a result of using different research methods. Anderson largely used

quantitative data from census returns; Roberts used qualitative data from in-depth interviews. Interviews would be more likely to reveal a sense of duty towards relatives than statistical data.

Finch concludes that the two studies do not necessarily have to be seen as contradictory. It may be that they highlight different aspects of family life in which:

> *Feelings of affection and concepts of duty are taken into calculations about mutual advantage based on material considerations. The result is patterns of support whose basis is probably far more complex than it appears to an outsider and which also perhaps includes the expectation that love and affection themselves will be reciprocated.*
>
> Finch, 1989

Whatever the basis of support between kin, Roberts and Anderson are in agreement that nineteenth-century industrialization did not destroy extended family relationships. This conclusion is also supported by the next research that we will consider, that of Young and Willmott.

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*, they attempt to trace the development of the family from pre-industrial England to the 1970s (Young and Willmott, 1973). 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 organization 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 that '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, 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 or three miles of their residence.

There was a close tie between female relatives. Over 50 per cent of the married women in the sample had seen their mothers 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.

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, and increased employment opportunities for women. Various provisions of the welfare state such as family allowances, sickness and unemployment benefits, and old-age pensions have also reduced the need for dependence on the kinship network.

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 20 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. It became more comfortable 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 uninvolving 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 that 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 has 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 examine in detail the family life of

2 Greater emphasis by the government and others upon trying to eradicate what some have seen as 'poor parenting', by getting kin beyond children's parents involved in looking after them.
3 Increases in the levels of divorce, cohabitation, lone parenthood, and births outside marriage.
4 An increase in the proportion of families living in poverty and reliant upon benefits, partly as a consequence of more family members experiencing unemployment.
5 A larger proportion of married women taking paid employment outside the home.
6 Young people have started entering the labour force later, and older men are more likely than before to experience unemployment.
7 The labour market has changed so that there are relatively few unskilled jobs for manual workers (especially men) but there is more demand for the highest-qualified workers. More people work part-time or in non-permanent employment.
8 As a consequence of some of these changes, the young often stay reliant upon their families for longer than they did in the past.

Given the scope of these changes, you might expect there to be very major differences in family relationships and the strength of kinship networks. However, McGlone *et al.* actually found considerable continuity between 1986 and 1995.

Contacts with relatives in 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 mothers at least once a week (see Table 8.1). And 35 per cent of those without children and 45 per cent of those with children saw their fathers 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. Amongst 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. Amongst 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. Amongst 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. Tables 8.2 and 8.3 show that contacts were more frequent for manual workers than for non-manual workers, particularly among those with dependent children. The difference between manual and non-manual workers was partly explained by a tendency for manual workers to live closer to relatives but, even when this was taken into account, some differences remained.

Changes in contact over time

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. As Table 8.4 shows, 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. This was particularly true of

[illegible] who live [illegible] once a week, by whether there is a dependent child (1995)

	No child under 16		All with child under 16		Age of child in household: Under 5		5 to 15	
	%	*Base*	%	*Base*	%	*Base*	%	*Base*
Mother	47	535	50	478	51	226	48	252
Father	35	385	45	395	47	206	44	189
Adult sibling	25	1,097	36	543	41	245	33	298
Other relative	31	1,250	45	552	49	242	42	310

Note: The base for each percentage comprises all those with the specified relative (non-resident).
Source: F. McGlone, A. Park and K. Smith (1998) *Families and Kinship*, Family Policy Studies Centre, London, p. 12.

Table 8.2 Proportion with a dependent child who see specified relative at least once a week, by social class (1995)

	Manual workers		Non-manual workers	
	%	*Base*	%	*Base*
Mother	65	193	39	271
Father	59	160	36	223
Adult sibling	46	235	28	291
Other relative	57	224	37	314

Note: The base for each percentage comprises all those with the specified relative (non-resident) and dependent children.

Source: F. McGlone, A. Park and K. Smith (1998) *Families and Kinship*, Family Policy Studies Centre, London, p. 14.

Table 8.3 Proportion without a dependent child who see specified relative at least once a week, by social class (1995)

	Manual workers		Non-manual workers	
	%	*Base*	%	*Base*
Mother	48	230	47	279
Father	37	173	33	189
Adult sibling	28	540	21	509
Other relative	38	571	24	629

Note: The base for each percentage comprises all those with the specified relative (non-resident) and with no dependent children.

Source: F. McGlone, A. Park and K. Smith (1998) *Families and Kinship*, Family Policy Studies Centre, London, p. 14.

Table 8.4 Proportion with a dependent child who see specified relative (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 who lives within one hour's journey time (non-resident) and dependent children.

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

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.

Families and help

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. Amongst 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 8.5 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 like 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

managing directors, which, in terms of their theory, should diffuse downwards in years to come. Managing directors are work-centred rather than home-centred – 'my business is my life' being a typical quote from those in the sample. Their leisure activities are 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 that '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 Willmott and Young'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 pp. 552–63 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 on p. 532.

The middle-class family

Contacts with kin

Many of the arguments examined in preceding sections suggest that the middle-class family should be less attached to kin beyond the nuclear unit than its working-class counterpart. The middle-class job market is more geographically mobile and more financially secure. There is therefore less opportunity and less need to maintain a wide kinship network. However, a number of studies have shown that middle-class families maintain close contacts with kin beyond the family.

Research conducted in the late 1950s by Willmott and Young in Woodford, a largely middle-class London suburb, showed that, despite the fact that kin were more geographically dispersed, compared to Bethnal Green, fairly regular contacts were maintained (Willmott and Young, 1960). In Bethnal Green, 43 per cent of husbands and wives had seen their mothers in the previous 24 hours, compared to 30 per cent in Woodford. Although in Woodford there was less frequent contact with parents while the latter were employed, the frequency of contact was much the same as in Bethnal Green when parents retired. On retirement, middle-class parents often moved to Woodford to live near their married children.

In their study of Swansea, South Wales, conducted in the early 1960s, Rosser and Harris found that levels of contact between parents and married children were similar to those in Bethnal Green (Rosser and Harris, 1965). This applied to both middle- and working-class families. Despite the wider dispersal of kin in Swansea, improved transportation facilities (particularly the family car) made frequent contact possible. Rosser and Harris state that 'The picture that emerges, then, is of a vigorous kinship grouping wider than the elementary (nuclear) family, similar to that described in the Bethnal Green studies.' As in Bethnal Green, the Swansea families exchanged services with kin beyond the nuclear family and provided each other with support in times of need.

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 also carried out in Swansea, Colin Bell questions whether the frequency of actual face-to-face contacts between kin provides an accurate assessment (Bell, 1968). 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 Bethnal Green may have far less significance than a formal visit to mother by her middle-class daughter.

In his study, Bell found a lower level of direct face-to-face contact with kin beyond the nuclear family than in either the Woodford sample or Rosser and Harris's middle-class sample. 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.

Bell makes a similar point about the provision of services for kin beyond the nuclear family. They may not be as numerous as those provided in the working class, but they may be just as significant. He found

that aid from parents, especially the son's father, was particularly important during the early years of marriage. It often took the form of loans or gifts to help with the deposit on a house or the expenses of the first baby. Bell concludes that kin beyond the nuclear family still play an important part in the lives of many middle-class families.

Similar conclusions were reached by Graham Allan in research conducted in a commuter village in East Anglia in the early 1970s (Allan, 1985). 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- 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 found that contacts with kin remained important in both the middle and working class (Willmott, 1988). 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 conducted research in Barking and Dagenham, East London, in the early 1990s (O'Brien and Jones, 1996). 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).

They 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 have been 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.* (eds) (1989) and McGlone *et al.*, 1996). The surveys used large representative samples of the British population. The results of these two surveys have been analysed by Francis McGlone, Alison Park and Kate Smith (1998).

Changes affecting families

McGlone *et al.* start by noting that a number of important changes that might affect family life took place between 1986 and 1995. Some of these were:

1 An increase in the proportion of elderly people in the British population, as people live longer and the birth-rate declines; and an increased emphasis by the government on families looking after their elderly rather than the welfare state.

Table 8.5 Attitudes towards the family, by whether there is a dependent child

	No child under 16		All with child under 16		Age of child: under 5		5 to 15	
% agreeing	%	*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

the 'core' of the family does not just include parents and children – in most households grandparents are part of the core as well. They 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.

Janet Finch – family obligations and social change

Janet Finch has studied changes in family life using a slightly different viewpoint from that of the studies discussed above (Finch, 1989). In a review of research conducted by many different sociologists she has discussed the changing nature of family obligations. Her work is particularly concerned with the extent to which members of a family feel obliged to offer assistance to their kin and feel a sense of duty towards them. This also involves considering what help is given, as well as the reasons behind the decision to give help.

Finch examines the extent to which relatives feel an obligation to provide accommodation by sharing households, and to give economic, emotional or moral support, practical help, financial assistance and personal care (for example, by nursing a sick relative). She considers the possibility that there was a 'Golden Age' before the Industrial Revolution in which family obligations were much stronger and family members helped each other far more.

The myth of a 'Golden Age'

Overall, Finch argues that the idea of a 'Golden Age' of the family which was undermined by the Industrial Revolution is a myth. For example, she says that there is no evidence that people automatically assumed responsibility for elderly relatives in pre-industrial times, and 'most elderly people who are married have always lived only with their spouse'. Also, when primogeniture (inheritance by the first-born son) was the main principle governing inheritance, parents made little or no financial provision for children other than the eldest son in their wills.

Some changes have certainly taken place: far fewer children are permanently looked after by relatives other than their own parents; and in the last 50 years a smaller proportion of the single elderly have been living with relatives. However, such changes are largely a result of demographic trends. Because life expectancy has risen, there are fewer orphans and more elderly people in the population. Because average family size has gone down since the nineteenth century, there are fewer children with whom the rising numbers of elderly might live.

In any case, according to Finch, much of the assistance given in the past was based upon mutual self-interest rather than a selfless sense of obligation to family members. People who took relatives' children into their households often employed them

as servants. When kin outside the immediate nuclear family have lived with each other in the past this has often been for the purpose of sharing housing costs. Before, during and since the Industrial Revolution most kin relationships have not been characterized by unconditional giving by some relatives to others, but have been based upon 'reciprocal exchange on the basis of mutual advantage'.

One exception to this general rule has been the relationship between parents and children. It has been and remains common for parents to help their children without expecting equivalent support in exchange.

Factors influencing family obligations

Finch stresses that the extent and nature of family obligations felt by people vary enormously from one family to another and are shaped partly by interpersonal relationships between the individuals involved. Nevertheless, family obligations are influenced by social factors such as region, gender, ethnicity, generation and the economic situation of the family and its members. Kin relationships remain special to people, and people generally feel more of a sense of duty to members of their family than to anybody else. However, having independence is also important to members of families and reliance upon kin is usually seen as a last resort rather than the first. The family can offer a safety net in times of need and it can offer mutual benefits, but people try to avoid relying upon it too much.

These characteristics of family relationships are not new, according to Finch. Although the circumstances in which family relationships are made have changed enormously since pre-industrial times, there is no evidence that in general there is less sense of obligation to kin than there was in the past.

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, 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' (Sussman and Burchinal, 1971).

Parsons replied to his critics in an article entitled 'The normal American family' (Parsons, 1965a). 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 that '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.

Evidence from Rosser and Harris's Swansea research supports Parsons's arguments. Rosser and Harris maintained that the nuclear family is 'a basic structural unit of the society' and, although kinship relationships beyond the nuclear family are important to individuals, in terms of the social structure as a whole they are 'not of major and critical importance' (Rosser and Harris, 1965).

The Swansea study revealed a 'vast variation' in kinship relationships. Members of some families were in daily contact with kin beyond the nuclear family; members of other families rarely saw their relatives. Janet Finch's review of family research also found a great variety of relationships within families (Finch, 1989). This is the expected finding in view of Parsons's emphasis upon individual choice. However, as we will see later in the chapter, it may be that nuclear families no longer (if they ever did) make up a vital structural unit in contemporary societies either. There is evidence that the decision to form a nuclear family is increasingly also a matter of choice (see pp. 563–5).

The 'modified extended family'

In order to clear up the confusion surrounding the term 'isolated nuclear family', Eugene Litwak argues that a new term, the modified extended family, should be introduced to describe the typical family in

modern industrial society. Litwak defines the modified extended family as:

> *a coalition of nuclear families in a state of partial dependence. Such partial dependence means that nuclear family members exchange significant services with each other, thus differing from the isolated nuclear family, as well as retain considerable autonomy (that is not bound economically or geographically) therefore differing from the classical extended family.*
>
> Quoted in Morgan, 1975, p. 65

The 'modified elementary family'

Graham Allan accepts Litwak's view that kin outside the nuclear family continue to be important in industrial society (Allan, 1985). On the basis of his own research in a commuter village in East Anglia, he argues that in normal circumstances non-nuclear kin do not rely on each other. In many families there may be little exchange of significant services most of the time. However, in most families the members do feel an obligation to keep in touch. For example, very few married children break off relationships with their parents altogether, and brothers and sisters usually maintain contact. Although significant services are not usually exchanged as a matter of course, kin frequently recognize an obligation to help each other in times of difficulty or crisis.

Unlike Litwak, Allan believes that these kinds of relationships are confined to an inner or 'elementary' family, consisting of wives and husbands, their parents, children, brothers and sisters. The obligations do not extend to uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, cousins or more distant kin. Allan therefore prefers the term modified elementary family to 'modified extended family', since to him it more accurately describes the range of kin who are important to an individual.

The 'dispersed extended family'

On the basis of research carried out in London in the 1980s, Peter Willmott reached broadly similar conclusions to Litwak and Allan. He claims that the dispersed extended family is becoming dominant in Britain (Willmott, 1988). 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 amongst 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.

Like Litwak, 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.

In this section we have focused on the changes in household composition and kinship networks that have accompanied industrialization in Britain. We will now examine the extent to which the idea of a 'typical family' is accurate.

Family diversity

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 by a plurality 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) has 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 has attacked the image of the 'monolithic family'. She argues that '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' (Thorne, 1992). She argues that the focus on the family unit neglects structures of society that lead to variations in families. She says, '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.

Households in Britain

The view that such images equate with reality has been 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.

As Table 8.6 shows, since the Rapoports 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 38 per cent in 1961 to just 23 per cent in 1998. There has been a corresponding increase in single-person households in the same period, with the proportion of households of this type rising from 11 per cent in 1961 to 28 per cent in 1998. Furthermore, the proportion of households that were single-parent households with dependent children more than tripled, from 2 per cent in 1961 to 7 per cent in 1998. The total number of lone-parent households rose from 6 per cent to 10 per cent over the same period. Single-parent families are discussed in more detail on pp. 541–4.

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 Rapoports. They identify five distinct elements of family diversity in Britain:

Table 8.6 Households[1] by type of household and family

	1961	1971	1981	1991	1998
	%	%	%	%	%
One person					
Under pensionable age	4	6	8	11	14
Over pensionable age	7	12	14	16	14
Two or more unrelated adults	5	4	5	3	3
Single family households					
Couple[2]					
No children	26	27	26	28	28
1–2 dependent children[3]	30	26	25	20	19
3 or more dependent children[3]	8	9	6	5	4
Non-dependent children only	10	8	8	8	7
Lone parent[2]					
Dependent children[3]	2	3	5	6	7
Non-dependent children only	4	4	4	4	3
Multi-family households	3	1	1	1	1
All households[4] (=100%) (millions)	16.3	18.6	20.2	22.4	23.6

1 At spring 1998.
2 Other individuals who are not family members may also be included.
3 May also include non-dependent children.
4 Includes couples of the same gender in 1998.
Source: *Social Trends* (1999) HMSO, London, p. 42.

1 First, there is what they term organizational diversity. By this they mean there are variations in family structure, household type, 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. The reconstituted family is the second 'emerging form' identified by the Rapoports. 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 that 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 that step-siblings 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. 566–72.)

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 ethnic minority groups. (We discuss ethnic family diversity in more detail on pp. 544–8.) Differences in lifestyle between Catholic and Protestant families may also be an important element of diversity.

3 There are differences between middle- and working-class families in terms of relationships between adults and the way in which children are socialized.

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 and from those whose children have achieved adult status.

5 The fifth factor identified by the Rapoports as producing family diversity is cohort. This refers to the periods at which the family has 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.

Regional diversity

In addition to these five aspects of diversity identified by the Rapoports, David Eversley and Lucy Bonnerjea (1982) point to regional diversity. They argue that there tend to be distinctive patterns of family life in different areas of Great Britain:

1 In what they term 'the sun belt' (the affluent southern parts of England) two-parent upwardly mobile families are typical. Eversley and Bonnerjea claim that this area attracts family builders.

2 They describe a number of coastal regions as the 'geriatric wards'. Much of the south coast (from Cornwall to Sussex, for example) has a disproportionate number of retired couples without dependent children, and widows and widowers.

3 Older industrial areas suffering from long-term decline tend to have fairly conventional and traditional family structures.

4 Inner-city areas tend to have greater concentrations of both one-parent and ethnic minority families.

5 What they describe as 'newly declining industrial areas' (particularly likely to be found in the Midlands) have more diverse family patterns.

6 The final type of region identified by Eversley and Bonnerjea is the truly rural area. Here, the family-based farm tends to produce strong kinship networks.

Gay and lesbian families

Since the Rapoports' pioneering volume on family diversity in Britain, other forms of diversity have developed or become more prominent. Gay and lesbian households may 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 argue, 'During the past generation the possibilities of living an openly lesbian and gay life have been transformed' (Weeks, Donovan and Heaphey, 1999). As discussed earlier (see p. 507), 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 who 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. 578–9 for details.)

New reproductive technologies

Unlike gay and lesbian relationships, new reproductive technologies add an entirely new dimension to family diversity. It was not until 1978 that 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 implanting 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 questions about what constitutes a family. As noted earlier (see pp. 521–3), 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 grandchild. 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.

A global trend

According to Rhona Rapoport (1989), the decline of conventional family forms and the increasing diversity are part of a global trend. She quotes figures showing a movement towards diverse family structures in very different European countries. In Finland, the percentage of households consisting of a nuclear family declined from 63.8 per cent in 1950 to 60 per cent in 1980. In Sweden, the decline was from 52.4 per cent in 1960 to 42.6 per cent in 1980, and in East Germany from 56.7 per cent in 1957 to 48.7 per cent in 1977. She also points to an enormous increase throughout Europe in the proportion of married women who have paid employment, which suggests that men's and women's roles within marriage are changing and consequently new family forms are developing. These conclusions are broadly shared by a study of diversity in Europe.

Diversity and European family life

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 14 European nations (Boh, 1989). These were Belgium, Finland, France, the German Democratic Republic and Federal Republic of Germany (the study was carried out before re-unification), Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and the then Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.

The findings of individual national studies were analysed and compared by Katja Boh. She tried to 'trace the tendencies in changes of family patterns' in order to:

> *answer the crucial question whether these tendencies converge, which would mean that family patterns in European family life are becoming more similar, or the recent political and economic developments have produced differences contributing to a greater diversity in family life patterns.*
>
> Boh, 1989

Evidence of diversity

In most aspects of family life Boh found a wide range of patterns in different countries:

1. The likelihood of married women working varied greatly, with well over 80 per cent in work in the Soviet Union, but less than one-third in Belgium and the Netherlands.
2. Marriage rates appeared to be diverging. In 1932, Poland had the highest rate at 8.3 marriages per thousand of the population; Norway had the lowest at 6.2. By 1984 the gap between the highest rate (10.3 in the USSR) and the lowest (4 in Sweden) was much greater.
3. Boh noted that cohabitation as an alternative to marriage was becoming common in Sweden and Finland but remained comparatively rare in Belgium and Italy.
4. She also discovered that the number of children born per woman was greatest in the Soviet Union and Poland and lowest in the Federal Republic of Germany and the Netherlands.
5. As discussed previously, single parents are much more common in some European countries than in others. Boh found that the highest rates in 1981 were in Finland, while the lowest were in the Soviet Union.

Common trends

Although most of the evidence showed that family life was very different in different European countries, some evidence did point to certain trends being widespread. 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.

Convergence in diversity

The existence of diverse patterns of family life in Europe, but with some common trends, seems at first sight to be contradictory. However, Katja Boh argues that, together, they produce a consistent pattern of convergence in diversity. While family life retains considerable variations from country to country, throughout Europe a greater range of family types is being accepted as legitimate and normal. This has been caused by:

> *Increasing gender symmetry in work patterns, more freedom in conjugal choice and a more hedonistic view of marriage and love, premarital and experimental sexuality, higher marriage instability and alternative forms of 'living together', decreasing fertility and change in forms of parenting.*
>
> Boh, 1989

Boh concludes:

> *Whatever the existing patterns are, they are characterized by the acceptance of diversity that has given men and women the possibility to choose inside the boundaries of available options the life pattern that is best adapted to their own needs and aspirations.*
>
> Boh, 1989

Before evaluating whether there has really been a move towards diversity, and discussing the significance of the changes that have taken place, we will examine two particularly important sources of diversity – lone parenthood and ethnicity – in greater detail.

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 1998 this had more than tripled to 7 per cent (*Social Trends*, 1999). Between 1972 and 1996-7 the percentage of children living in single-parent families increased from 7 per cent to 19 per cent (*Social Trends*, 1998). According to Hantrais and Letablier (1996), Britain has the second highest rate of lone parenthood in Europe. It is exceeded only by Denmark, and rates in countries such as Greece, Portugal and France are much lower than those in Britain. Nevertheless, throughout Europe and in advanced industrial countries such as Japan and the USA, the proportions have generally been increasing since at least the 1980s.

Although useful, figures on the proportions living in single-parent families 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 them or cohabit with them. The child will then end up living with two parents.

Greg Duncan and Willard Rodgers estimated – from survey data on children born between 1967 and 1969 in the USA – that less than a third of children born into a single-parent family stayed in one throughout their childhood (Duncan and Rodgers, 1990). 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 clearcut.

The causes of single parenthood

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

1 divorce
2 separation
3 death of a spouse.

Lone parents who have never been married:

1 may have been living with the parent of the child when the child was born, but they subsequently stopped living together.
2 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.

Official figures for Britain show that the largest proportion of female lone parents in 1995–7 were single, with about a third being divorced and just under a quarter separated. The figures for those who were single do not differentiate between those who were cohabiting when the child was conceived and those who were not. These proportions have changed over time. Between 1971 and 1995–7, according to official statistics, the proportion of lone mothers who were single rose from 21 per cent to 33 per cent, the proportion who were divorced rose from 16 per cent to 38 per cent, while the proportion who were widowed fell from 21 per cent to just 6 per cent. The proportions among lone fathers were somewhat different in 1995–7, with more becoming lone parents through being widowed. It should be noted, though, that lone fathers make up only a small minority of lone parents. Only 1 per cent of the family households in the 1996 *General Household Survey* were headed by lone fathers, compared to 18 per cent that were headed by lone mothers (Thomas, Walker, Willmott and Bennett, 1998).

Clearly, then, the rise in lone motherhood is closely related both to increases in the divorce rate and to an increase in births outside marriage. The causes of the rise in divorces are discussed later in this chapter (see pp. 568–72). The increase in single lone 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 cohabiting, 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.

According to figures quoted by Brown, there has been a marked increase in jointly registered births outside marriage. In 1971 just 45 per cent of births were jointly registered in England and Wales but this had increased to 76 per cent by 1992. Of these, nearly three-quarters were registered by couples living at the same address. Brown also points out that some lone mothers may intend to cohabit with the father of their child but may be prevented from doing so if they cannot find or afford accommodation together.

The absence of cohabitation does not necessarily imply that the parents do not have a close relationship. Some writers see the rise of single parenthood as a symptom of increased tolerance of diverse family forms. For example, the Rapoports (1982) claim that the single-parent family is an important 'emerging form' of the family which is becoming accepted as a legitimate alternative to other family structures.

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 conducted research into 31 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' (Burghes and Brown, 1995). In this small sample, all aspired to forming a two-parent household, but they had failed to achieve it despite their preference.

A number of Conservative politicians have argued that the increase in single parenthood is a consequence of the welfare state. John Selwyn Gummer claimed that there are 'perverse incentives' for young women to become pregnant so that it increases their chance of being allocated council housing. In July 1993, two other Conservative ministers, Peter Lilley and John Redwood, expressed concern about the cost of welfare payments to single-parent families and the possibility that the availability of such payments encouraged single parenthood. In 1993, the then Home Secretary, Michael Howard, expressed approval for a policy in New Jersey in the USA, in which welfare benefits were withdrawn from lone mothers (discussed in McIntosh, 1996).

The view that welfare payments create lone motherhood has been closely associated with Charles Murray's view of the underclass (discussed on pp. 91–2 and 323–8). According to Mary McIntosh, the US President Bill Clinton has suggested that Murray's explanation for the development of the underclass is basically correct. New Labour politicians in Britain have been less willing to openly suggest 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 (discussed in the Green Paper, *Supporting Families*, 1998). (See pp. 576–7 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, single parents who are reliant upon benefits tend to live in poor housing conditions and to have low standards of living. There is little material incentive to become a single parent.

3 There is evidence that a large majority of single 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. A 1991 DSS survey found that 90 per cent of single parents would like to work at some point in the future and 55 per cent would start work immediately if they could obtain suitable help with childcare (quoted in the *Observer*, 11 July 1993). 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.

David Morgan suggests that 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' (Morgan, 1994).

A longer-term trend that helps to account for the increase could be a decline in the stigma attached to single parenthood. This 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' (Morgan, 1994).

The consequences of single parenthood

Single parenthood has increasingly become a contentious issue, with some arguing that 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, p. 151

Similar sentiments have been expressed by British Conservative politicians and, when they were in government, such views began to influence social policies (see pp. 574–6). New Labour politicians have been less inclined to condemn single parenthood outright, but the Labour government's 1998 Green Paper, *Supporting Families*, did say that '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 we consider in detail on pp. 91–6. Mary McIntosh says that 'Over recent years, the media in the United Kingdom have been reflecting a concern about lone mothers that amounts to a moral panic' (McIntosh, 1996). 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 that 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 1996 found that single-parent families were disadvantaged in comparison to other British families. In 1996, 60 per cent of lone-mother families had a gross weekly income of below £150 per week, compared to 7 per cent of married couples (Thomas *et al.*, 1998).

Many of these differences stem from the likelihood of lone-parent families relying upon benefit. British government figures show that, in 1961, one in six lone parents received government benefits; by 1993,

over three-quarters did so. According to DSS figures from 1993, the average single parent with one child received just £67.55 per week in income support, although they might in addition receive extra child allowance and housing benefit to cover rent or mortgage payments.

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 have listed the findings of a number of American studies which seem to indicate that children are harmed by single parenthood. These studies have claimed that such children have lower earnings and experience more poverty as adults; children of mother-only families are more likely to become lone parents themselves; and they are more likely to become delinquent and engage in drug abuse (McLanahan and Booth, 1991).

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 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 that 'it is the quality of the family relationships, of which the divorce is only a part, that are influential' (Burghes, 1996).

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).

E.E. Cashmore has 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 that 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 that 'Lone parents do not need a partner so much as a partner's income.'

David Morgan does believe that the evidence suggests that the children of single parents fare less well than those from two-parent households (Morgan, 1994). He qualifies this by saying that '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 that '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 ethnic minority groups. They have been particularly concerned to establish the extent to which the family relationships typical of the societies of origin of the ethnic minorities have been modified within the British context. Thus, sociologists have compared ethnic minority 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 ethnic minorities are becoming more similar to other British families, then family diversity resulting from ethnic differences might be only temporary.

Statistical evidence

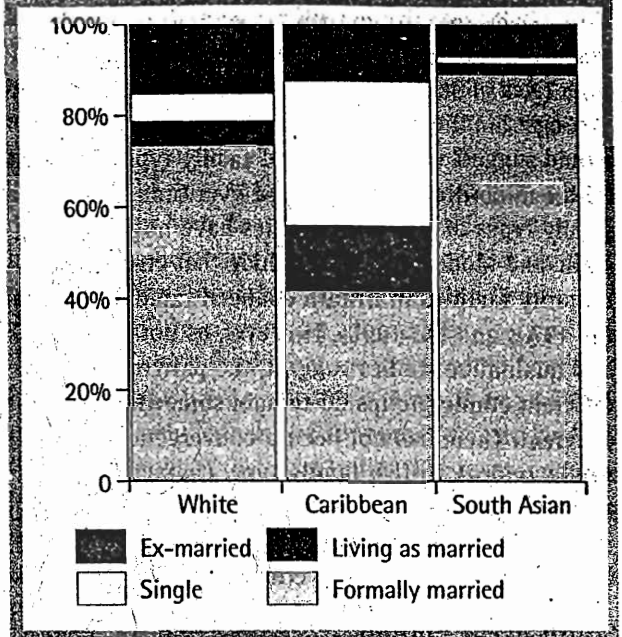
Statistical evidence does suggest that there are some differences in the prevalence of different household types in different ethnic groups.

The Policy Studies Institute's *Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities*, which was conducted in England and Wales in 1994, also found significant differences between the families and households of different ethnic groups (Modood *et al.* 1997, see p. 216 for further details of the survey). Table 8.7 shows the marital status of different ethnic groups among adults under 60. It shows that whites and Caribbeans had higher rates of divorce and cohabitation than other groups, and that Indians, African Asians, Bangladeshis and Pakistanis were the ethnic groups who were most likely to be married.

The survey also found marked differences in the parental status of families with children. These are shown in Figure 8.1. The survey found that 90 per cent of South Asian families with children had married parents. Amongst whites, 75 per cent of families had married parents; amongst Caribbean families, less than 50 per cent had married parents, and a third had single, never-married mothers.

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 8.8 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 ethnic minorities. The rate amongst 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.

Figure 8.1 Parental status of families with children



Source: T. Modood *et al.* (1997) *Ethnic Minorities in Britain*, PSI, London, p. 84

Table 8.8 Proportion of families with children headed by lone parents, 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. 49

Table 8.7 Marital status

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 either dependent children aged 60 or more

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

Rates amongst 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 amongst families of Caribbean origin in 1974. This would suggest that diversity of family types amongst ethnic minorities has developed over time. The family types of ethnic minorities have not remained static and Modood *et al.* conclude that ethnic minority families in Britain changed rapidly between the 1970s and the 1990s. However, as both statistics and qualitative studies suggest, the patterns of different 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.

South Asian families

Roger Ballard (1982, 1990) has 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, Gujerat 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 that married couples in Britain expect more independence from their kin. In some families extended kinship networks are less important than they traditionally are because some of the kin remain in South Asia or live 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 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 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 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.

Asian families in the PSI *National Survey*

Data on families collected in the Policy Studies Institute's *Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities* was 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 hous

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 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.

Cypriot families in Britain

Robin Oakley (1982) conducted a study of Cypriot families in Britain. This group numbers around 140,000, and in some areas, particularly London, the Cypriot community has been established since just after the First World War. Most of the immigration took place in the 20 years following the Second World War.

According to Oakley, Cypriots traditionally have very strong extended family ties, and parents retain strong connections with married children. There are taboos against seeking outside help to solve family problems, and families are not child-centred – children are expected to pull their weight like other family members. Oakley found little evidence that these patterns had changed significantly among British Cypriot families despite the length of time some of them had been in Britain. There were relatively few elderly Cypriots in Britain and for this reason extended kinship links were somewhat weaker than in Cyprus itself.

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 second main type found in the West Indies, the common-law family, 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 third type Barrow calls 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 in Britain amongst West Indian groups. Geoffrey Driver (1982), however, has 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 United Kingdom 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, she 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 Afro-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 of white British families.

Berthoud and Beishon, 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' (Berthoud and Beishon, 1997). British Afro-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 Afro-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.

Ethnicity and family diversity – conclusion

The general picture provided by these studies, then, suggests that immigrants and their descendants have adapted their family life to fit British circumstances, but have not fundamentally altered the relationships on which their traditional family life was based. This would suggest that the existence of a variety of ethnic groups has indeed contributed to the diversity of family types to be found in Britain. These ethnic minorities 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 ethnic minorities, 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 that:

> *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, p. 62

Ethnic minority 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. The Cypriot example, though, demonstrates the considerable resilience of the culture of an ethnic group, some of whom have been settled in Britain for well over half a century.

Robert Chester – the British neo-conventional family

In a strong 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 that the evidence advanced by writers such as the Rapoports was misleading, and that 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 containing 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 8.9 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 1998, 30 per cent of households consisted of two parents plus children, but 49 per cent of people lived in such households. Despite the decline, very nearly half were still living in nuclear, two-generation households, with a further 24 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–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 husband is the sole breadwinner. He accepted that women were increasingly making a contribution to household finances by taking paid employment outside the home.

However, he argued that, although 58 per cent of wives, according to his figures, 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. Because of such figures he argued that '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 he recognized that 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 feature in most people's lives, he perhaps overstated his case. As Table 8.9 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 49 per cent in 1998. 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 1990, the position was summed up by Kathleen Kiernan and Malcolm Wicks who said that 'Although still the most prominent form, the nuclear family is for increasing numbers of individuals only one of several possible family types that they experience during their lives.' Similarly, in 1999, Elizabeth Silva and Carol Smart argue that fairly traditional family forms remain important. They note that:

> *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, p. 3

Nevertheless, they argue that 'personal choices appear as increasingly autonomous and fluid'. The idea that family diversity indicates a new era of choice was first advanced by the Rapoports in 1982. 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 passage of time does not seem to have made their argument less valid. Indeed, a growing number of 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. 577–84.)

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.

Table 8.9 Households and people in households in Great Britain, 1981 and 1998

Type of household	% of households 1981	% of people 1981	% of households 1998	% of people 1998
One person	22	8	28	12
Married couple	26	20	28	24
Married couple with dependent children	32	49	23	40
Married couple with independent children	8	10	7	9
Lone parent with dependent children	4	5	7	8
Other	9	8	7	8

Source: *Social Trends* (1982 and 1999) HMSO, London

The changing functions of the family

The loss of functions

Many 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, p. 16

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 that '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.

This view is supported by N. Dennis (1975) who argues that impersonal bureaucratic agencies have taken over many of the family's functions. As a result, the warmth and close supportive relationships that existed when the family performed a large range of functions have largely disappeared.

Dennis argues that, in the impersonal setting of modern industrial society, the family provides the only opportunity 'to participate in a relationship where people are perceived and valued as whole persons'. Outside the family, individuals must often interact with strangers in terms of a number of roles. Adopting roles such as employee, customer, teacher and student, they are unable to express many aspects of themselves or develop deep and supportive relationships. Dennis argues that:

> *marriage has become the only institution in which the individual can expect esteem and love. Adults have no one on whom they have the right to lean for this sort of support at all comparable with their right to lean on their spouse.*
>
> Dennis, 1975

Young and Willmott make a similar point, arguing that the emotional support provided by family relationships grows in importance as the family loses many of its functions. They claim that the family:

> *can provide some sense of wholeness and permanence to set against the more restricted and transitory roles imposed by the specialized institutions which have flourished outside the home. The upshot is that, as the disadvantages of the new industrial and impersonal society have become more pronounced, so the family has become more prized for its power to counteract them.*
>
> Young and Willmott, 1973, p. 269

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 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 that '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 that 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 pp. 529–30). They argue that '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.'

Neo-Marxist views

This economic function looks rather different from a neo-Marxist perspective. Writers such as Marcuse (1972) and Gorz (1965) argue that alienation at work leads to a search for fulfilment outside work. However, the capitalist-controlled mass media, with its advertisements that proclaim the virtues of family life and associate the products of industry with those virtues, simply creates 'false needs'. With pictures of the 'Persil mum' and the happy family in the midst of its consumer durables, the myth that material possessions bring happiness and fulfilment is promoted. This myth produces the obedient, motivated worker and the receptive consumer that capitalism requires. The family man or woman is therefore ideal material for exploitation. (We analyse Marcuse's views in more detail in Chapter 10.)

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.

They 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. (We discussed Delphy and Leonard's work in more detail earlier, see pp. 516–18. Housework is discussed in more detail on pp. 552–63.)

Summary and conclusions

In summary, 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. Postmodernists and difference feminists certainly reject the view that there is any single type of family which always performs certain functions (see pp. 582–4 for a discussion of postmodernism and pp. 519–23 for a discussion of difference feminism).

The writers discussed also tend to assume that families reproduce the existing social structure, whether this is seen as a functioning mechanism, an exploitative capitalist system, or as 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 pp. 562–3 for a discussion of lesbian families).

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

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 clearcut 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. (In fact, from their research Young and Willmott found that 72 per cent of husbands did housework other than washing up during the course of a week.) 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 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. 529–30). 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 amongst those who have argued that conjugal roles are increasingly becoming joint. However, most 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 the 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.'

Ann Oakley – housework and childcare

A rather different picture of conjugal roles emerged in Oakley's own research (1974). She collected information on 40 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 the working class (see Table 8.10). However, in both classes few men had a high level of participation in housework and childcare: few marriages could be defined as egalitarian. In only 15 per cent of marriages did men have a high level of participation in housework, and in childcare in only 25 per cent.