



**A/S Level
Study
Pack**



**Craig
Chester**

4: The Diversity of Contemporary Family and Household Structures

(4b): The Marriage vs. Cohabitation Debate

Key Concepts

Marriage rate: The number of eligible people, per 1000 of the population, who either get married or divorced in a given year.

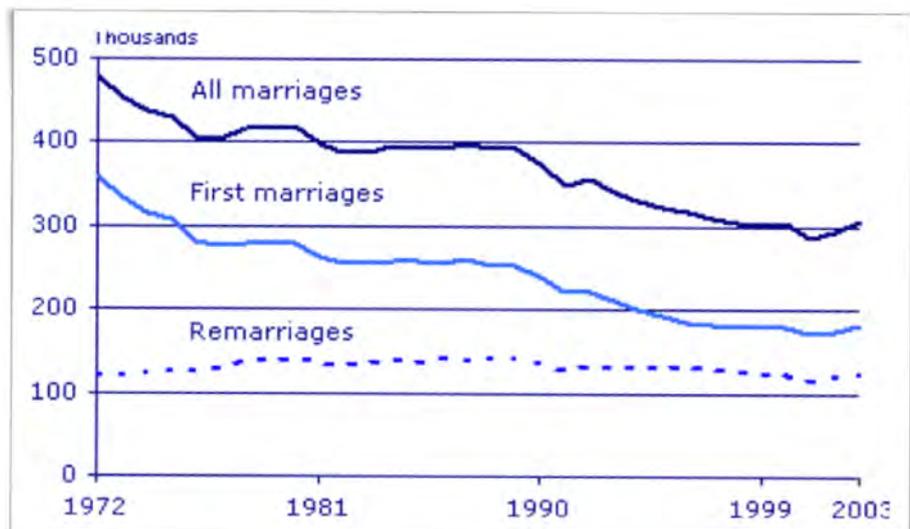
Serial Monogamy: in the course of a person's life the idea that s/he will have a number of 1:2:1 relationships as opposed to being with one person for life.

Empty-shell marriage: The marriage exists in name only: both partners still share the marital home, but , they no longer have any feelings for each other.

Cohabitation: A couple live together, with or without dependent children, without being married. This is sometimes termed a **common-law marriage** (although the term has been legally meaningless since the mid-18th century).

Introduction

Over the past 30 years, there has been a growing level of concern as to the state of the family. The marriage rate has declined steadily as demonstrated by chart.



Moreover, in contemporary society, there is a plurality of family structures (e.g. blended families) and a growing proportion of children are not raised in nuclear families.

Many social commentators have interpreted these statistical trends to support their belief that the family is in a state of terminal decline and that society, as we know it, is facing its greatest ever threat. The moral panic, which has evolved out of this crisis, is demonstrated by the following quotation from Patricia **Morgan** ("Farewell to the Family?"):

"Civilization is at stake. We have no record of societies without marriage and families. All societies that have survived have been built on marriage. We can't kid ourselves that we are an exception".

However, there are sociologists who refute this interpretation of the recent patterns in marriage and the growth of cohabiting couples, and claim that in spite of these trends, that marriage is still valued by members of contemporary society.

Key Theorists

Writer	Structure	Comment
Chester	Marriage	In spite of the stats, marriage is still popular ...
Chandler	Cohabitation	Cohabitation is an increasingly permanent arrangement
Beck	Marriage or Cohabitation or...	Modern men and women have the power to make choices and this creates family diversity
Giddens		

Summary

Robert Chester (Functionalism): He is sceptical about the idea that changes in the marriage rate are symbolic of a rejection of this institution. There is clear evidence to demonstrate that marriage patterns have changed dramatically in the post-war era, for example, people tend to get married at an older age and are more likely to co-habit or have a trial marriage before they *tie the knot*. He recognizes that the nuclear family as advocated by functionalists has largely disappeared. He contends that the neo-conventional family that is characterized by joint conjugal roles and greater sexual equality has replaced it. **Chester** argues that the statistics only reflect one stage in a person's life and the ultimately the majority of people will get married, have children and stay in this relationship. Indeed, statistics reveal that 77% of couples that married in 1996 lived together before they wed.



Joan Chandler: In previous generations, *the stigma of illegitimacy* meant that the vast majority of people believed that children should not be born out of wedlock; moreover, even if a childless couple lived in sin, other members of the community frowned it upon. She argues that the growth in cohabitation reflects a widespread rejection of these values. The view is supported by statistical evidence in that the number of cohabiting women rose from 11% (1979) to 23% (1991) and 28% of children are born to unmarried mothers. She also claims that contend that living together is increasingly becoming an alternative, as opposed to a prelude, to marriage, which contradicts the conclusions of **Chester**. Moreover, her research also casts doubt over the assertion that cohabitation is a new phenomenon, as there is evidence to suggest that *living over the brush* or self-marriage was widespread in Britain during the 18th & 19th centuries. Recent research by **Barlow et al.** support **Chandler** in that they claimed that cohabitation is widely seen as quite normal and marriage is more of a lifestyle choice rather than an expected part of life.

Ulrich Beck (Postmodern): He focuses on the choices available to people in the postmodern age, however, Beck emphasises the fact that the choices we make are the product of a calculation of *risk*. In the *risk society*, we are aware of the pitfalls of a particular course of action and this might lead to us opting for the next best alternative. For example, couples are aware that many marriages result in divorce and that divorce causes pain and anguish for both parties. Consequently, they may choose to cohabit almost as an insurance policy to protect themselves against the possibility of future pain. Also, because our lives in the risk society are so fraught and uncertain we depend more on our family for security. Ironically, this puts the relationship in jeopardy and creates more insecurity and the perceived risk will increase creating further family diversity.

Anthony Giddens (Late-modernity): His analysis has similarities with “difference feminists” such as **Calhoun** in that he evaluates the impact of choice in the late-modern age. However, rather than focusing on gay households, he focuses on heterosexual relationships. **Giddens** argues that the impact of reliable contraception and the increased number of workingwomen has changed the dynamic between men and women. Each party now has the opportunity to define his/her own reality. Relationships are based on fulfilment of individual needs such as a desire to be loved. **Giddens** contrasts late-modern couples with those from previous generations who married for financial or religious motives. The consequence of his arguments to debate is that he believes that there will inevitably be a plurality of household arrangements, including married and cohabiting couples, in late-modern societies.



Evaluation

The Marriage vs. Cohabitation Debate

It is evident that an increasingly large number of people choose not to get married. However, a considerable number of people still choose to solemnize their relationship rather than just cohabit, so we can be skeptical about those who feared that marriage was in terminal decline. In their attempts to explain our new-found diversity of family structures many different theories have been presented all of which reflect the theoretical and ideological biases of the authors.



Functionalists make valid observations about how marital relationships have changed but do not seem to recognize that an increasingly large number of people see cohabitation as a valid family structure. **Chandler** presents a sophisticated analysis of the growth in cohabiting couples but does not explain why many couples decide just to live together.

Finally, the **postmodernists** emphasize choice but maybe do not appreciate that for women in many households their lives are as predictable as their grandmother’s lives were i.e. live in a nuclear family with a traditional patriarchal structure.

20 Questions

1. Explain what is meant by serial monogamy
2. Identify the key differences between marriage and cohabitation
3. Identify the main trends for first marriages and re-marriages over the past 30 years
4. What is Chester about in reference to marriage rates?
5. Identify two characteristics of the modern as opposed to a post-war marriage
6. Characterise the sexual division of labour in the neo-conventional family
7. What proportion of married couples cohabited before they wd (1996)?
8. Explain what is meant by stigma of illegitimacy
9. What traditional values are no longer adhered to?
10. What happened to the proportion of cohabiting couples from 1979 to 1991?
11. How does Chandler's conclusions regarding cohabitation and marriage compare to those of Chester?
12. Is cohabitation a new phenomenon un the UK?
13. Explain what is meant by the risk society?
14. What is the key risk that Beck associates with marriage?
15. How might a person act to protect him/herself against that risk?
16. What effect does this have on family diversity?
17. What is the difference between Giddens' and Calhoun's analysis?
18. What two things give women more power to define their own reality when compared to women of previous generations?
19. What makes modern marriages so special?
20. Explain what is meant by plurality of household arrangements



