



**A/S Level
Study
Pack**



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4: The Diversity of Contemporary Family and Household Structures

(4d): Alternative Family Structures

Key Concepts

Lone Parent Families: There are five main types of single parent family: *separated lone mothers* (18%); *lone fathers* (9%); *single lone mothers* (41%); *widowed lone mothers* (5%); and *divorced lone mothers* (27%) – Social Trends (2002).

Blended / Reconstituted Families: When two people get married one or both of whom have been married before and have children from a previous relationship. This family structure is also referred to as a step-family.

Beanpole Families: as the name suggests, are long and thin! Usually 3 generations (e.g. Nan, Mum, Dad and dependent children) who may or may not live with one another.

Introduction

Below is a press release from a recent National Statistics Office publication that sheds some light on the extent of contemporary family diversity. The obvious sociological question to derive from this is *why have we moved away from the nuclear family?* Assuming of course that it ever actually was dominant! This diversity relates to the structures identified below and, amongst others, the beanpole family and gay & lesbian households. In our postmodern age, the possibilities as to what we perceive to be *a family* are endless...

See section 4(b) for analysis of marriage

Married couple families still the majority

<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/focuson/families>

The number of **married couple families** in the UK has declined, but they still make up seven in ten of all families, according to a new report on families published today by the Office for National Statistics.

See section 4(e) for analysis of living alone

The total number of families reached 17 million in 2004, but the number of families headed by a married couple fell by half a million between 1996 and 2004, to just over 12 million. At the same time both lone-mother and cohabiting couple families increased, to 2.3 million and 2.2 million respectively.

Households - More people **living alone** in 2004, there were 7.0 million people living alone in Great Britain, nearly four times as many as in 1961. As a result the average household size has declined from 3.1 to 2.4 over the same period.

see this section for analysis of single parent families

Dependent children - 1 in 4 in **lone-parent families**

In 2004, most dependent children (66 per cent) in the UK lived in a married couple family. One in four dependent children lived in a lone-parent family - an increase from 1 in 14 in 1972.

see this section for analysis of stepfamilies

See section 4(b) for analysis of cohabitation

Stepfamilies: 10 per cent of families in the United Kingdom are **stepfamilies (i.e. Blended or reconstituted)**.

In 2001, 10 per cent of all families with dependent children in the UK were stepfamilies - 0.4 million were headed by married couples and 0.3 million were headed by **cohabiting couples**

Key Theorists

Writer	Structure	Comment
Rapoports	Lone parent	Stigma of single parenthood is disappearing
Cashmore	Lone parent	Lone parenthood is preferable to unhappy marriage
Burgoyne and Clark	Blended	In an age of <i>serial monogamy</i> increasing numbers will live in stepfamilies (remarrying or cohabiting)
Brannen	Beanpole	Cross generational cooperation between different family members

Summary

Robert and Rhona Rapoport: The single parent family is perhaps the most maligned of all contemporary family structures: **Section 3b** detailed the contention of New Right sociologists and politicians that such families are neither normal nor desirable. However, the **Rapoports'** seek to challenge this view. They claim that there are a plurality of family forms which in modern Britain and that it is increasingly a matter of individual choice as to which one to adopt. This reflects the postmodern views of **Giddens** and the difference feminists. **David Morgan** reaches similar conclusions, to the **Rapoports**, in that he states that much of the stigma associated with lone parenthood is disappearing. He also contends that it is dangerous to claim that there is a link between family structure and social problems (e.g. crime or poor educational performance), as so many other factors need to be considered.

E. E. Cashmore: He is very critical of the notion that a child should be reared by both of the natural parents. He contends that rather than a couple staying together **for the sake of the children** that it may be more beneficial for children to live in stability with one caring parent. He also recognizes how the patriarchal nature of the nuclear family (demonstrated by the sexual division of labour and instances of domestic violence) may make lone parenting an attractive alternative for modern women, regardless of its inherent difficulties. He concludes by stating, "one parents do not need a partner so much as a partner's income."



Burgoyne and Clark: Their research builds upon the **Rapoports** contention that people can select the family structure, which most closely relates to their individual situation. A significant proportion of marriages each year lead to the creation of a blended family. They estimate that 7% of all children under 17 will live with a stepparent. Although the potential for tension is high in such a relationship, especially if the child still sees it's other natural parent, **Burgoyne and Clark** argue that the many couples find that living in such a relationship to be very positive and they predict that with the growing number of divorces in the U.K. that more and more people will live in a step-family. Their findings can be used to support the findings of **Fletcher** in that it shows that people are prepared to re-marry and also **Chandler** in that many couples choose simply to live together the second time around.

Evaluation

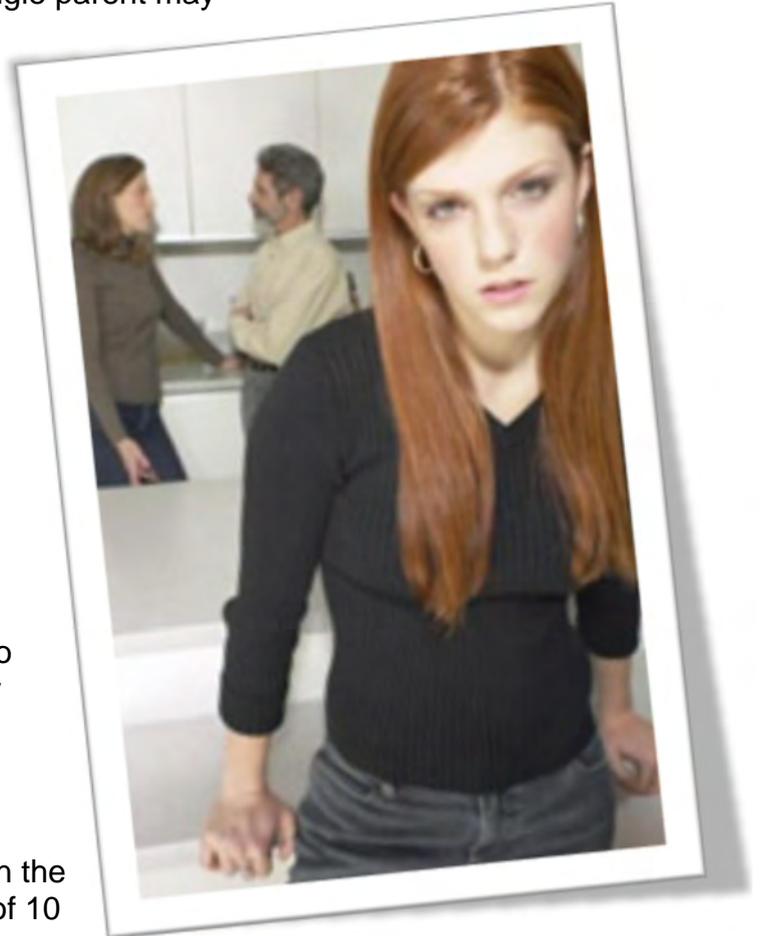
Whether we like it or not, the days when the vast majority of children were raised in a nuclear family are over.

The focus of this section has been to evaluate possible reasons for the growth in alternative family structures. The postmodern notion of choice is once again deemed to be a significant factor. Interestingly, practical necessity also seems to play an increasing role in deciding what type of family to raise our children in. For example, a divorced single parent may have to create a beanpole family to allow her to work and care for a young child.

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that we cannot attribute contemporary family diversity to one single factor – several interrelated reasons all play a part. We have already evaluated whether or not the decline in the nuclear family is beneficial for society, hence, a second feature of this section has been to provide evidence that demonstrates how such family units may actually be a positive environment in which to raise a child. Indeed, they may actually prove to be better than nuclear families!

A final point worthy of consideration was highlighted in the opening press release – 7 out of 10 children are raised in nuclear families. Therefore, it could be argued that the moral panic over contemporary family diversity is a lot of fuss about nothing. Especially when one remembers the findings of ANDERSON when he showed that there has always been a variety of family structures that exist in the UK.

There is nothing new about this debate!



20 Questions

1. What are the 5 main types of single parent family?
2. Explain what is meant by blended families.
3. What is the most maligned of contemporary family structures?
4. Explain what is meant by plurality of family forms.
5. According to the Rapoport, what is the key factor that determines the type of family you live in?
6. Which other sociologists draw similar conclusions to the Rapoport?
7. What notion is Cashmore especially critical of?
8. Explain what is meant by stay together for the sake of the children.
9. What two things led Cashmore to conclude that modern nuclear family is still patriarchal?
10. According to Cashmore, what do lone parents actually need?
11. Whose analysis does Burgoyne and Clark build upon?
12. What proportion of under 17's live with a step-parent?
13. What is high in reconstituted families?
14. What do Burgoyne and Clark predict will happen in the future?
15. Which other sociologists' conclusions can be supported by the findings of Burgoyne and Clark?
16. What is the difference between a typical extended family and the one analysed by Brannen?
17. Describe a typical beanpole family.
18. Explain what is meant by inter-generational and intra-generational links
19. Which of these two links (inter or intra) are more significant in beanpole families?
20. Whose earlier research reached similar conclusions?

