

Sociology Factsheet



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Number 02

Families and Households -Changing Structure

Society is constantly changing and so too are the ways people live their lives.
This Factsheet will summarise these changes.

What is a family?

A family is a group of people who are related by blood or marriage.

What is a household?

A household refers to a person living alone or a group of people with the same address who share their living arrangements.



Families in the past

Period: Pre-industrial (agricultural)	Type of Family: Extended
<p>Support this view</p> <p>William Goode (1963) believed that the extended family was only appropriate for agricultural societies where labour-intensive work was carried out.</p> <p>Talcott Parsons (functionalist) believed that in pre-industrial societies, an extended family system existed which made it easier to carry out the wide variety of functions required (since more were available). Arenberg and Kimball's study of rural Ireland demonstrated the existence of a close-knit community in which extended families and neighbours relied on one another for help and support.</p> <p>Evaluation</p> <p>Laslett provides evidence which indicates that the large extended family was relatively uncommon in pre-industrial times. He examined parish records and concluded that only about 10% of households in England from 1564 to 1821 included kin beyond the nuclear family. He suggested that this was mainly due to the late marriage and relatively short life expectancy of most people at that time.</p>	
Period: Industrial	Type of Family: Nuclear
<p>Who/What support this view</p> <p>Talcott Parsons believed that the extended family of pre-industrial times was no longer needed because the nuclear family contained the basic roles of mother, father and children needed to carry out the families essential functions. The workforce in industrial society needed to be geographically mobile and a nuclear family was more able to move from place to place than an extended family. Therefore, Parsons argued that the nuclear family was the typical family structure in industrial society. He suggested that while a family continued to carry out functions which involved kin beyond the nuclear family – such as care of elderly relatives and the provision of financial help – these became non-essential or 'optional' functions. These functions have been taken over in industrial societies by specialist institutions such as social services and schools. Parsons therefore concluded that industrialisation led to a move from extended to nuclear families. William Goode (1963) reached similar conclusions.</p> <p>Evaluation</p> <p>Starkey and others such as Michael Anderson (1971) suggested that, rather than creating the nuclear family, industrialisation actually increased the likelihood of the extended family. This is because when people moved to newly created towns, they moved in with relatives in order to find comfort and security.</p> <p>Anderson carried out a study of the town of Preston, Lancashire based on a sample of 10% of the 1851 Census records. Anderson's research showed that 23% of households in Preston included kin beyond the nuclear family. He suggests that the process of industrialisation may in fact have strengthened the need for reliance on the extended family. The family provided a home for parentless children, a means of sharing the cost of accommodation and a means of financial support in sickness, unemployment and old age. Starkey goes further and argues that due to the crowded living conditions in the newly created towns, the time of industrialisation was probably the only period in the UK when there were large numbers of extended families. Community studies of working class neighbourhoods in the twentieth century have echoed Anderson's findings concerning the extended families. Peter Willmott and Michael Young's famous study (1961) of Bethnal Green in East London in the 1950s, Dennis et al's study (1956) of a Yorkshire mining village and Jeremy Tunstall's study (1962) of Hull trawler men in the 1960s all featured similar portraits of extended family life and support.</p>	

Exam Hint: Facts should always be supported by evidence/studies. Use studies that support what you are writing but also use studies that contradict the point you have made to increase your evaluation marks.

The Family Today – Family Diversity

A popular view of the family in modern Britain today is of a husband and wife with two or three children living in a nuclear family. This image – what **Edmund Leach** calls the ‘cereal packet image’ of the family – is fostered by advertisers who portray smiling families consuming their product.

In many ways this picture of the typical family is a misleading one. In 1992 under 25% of households in Britain consisted of a married couple and one or more dependent children. **Diana Gittins** (1985) points out that there is no longer such a thing as the typical British family, but instead there is a diversity of family types.

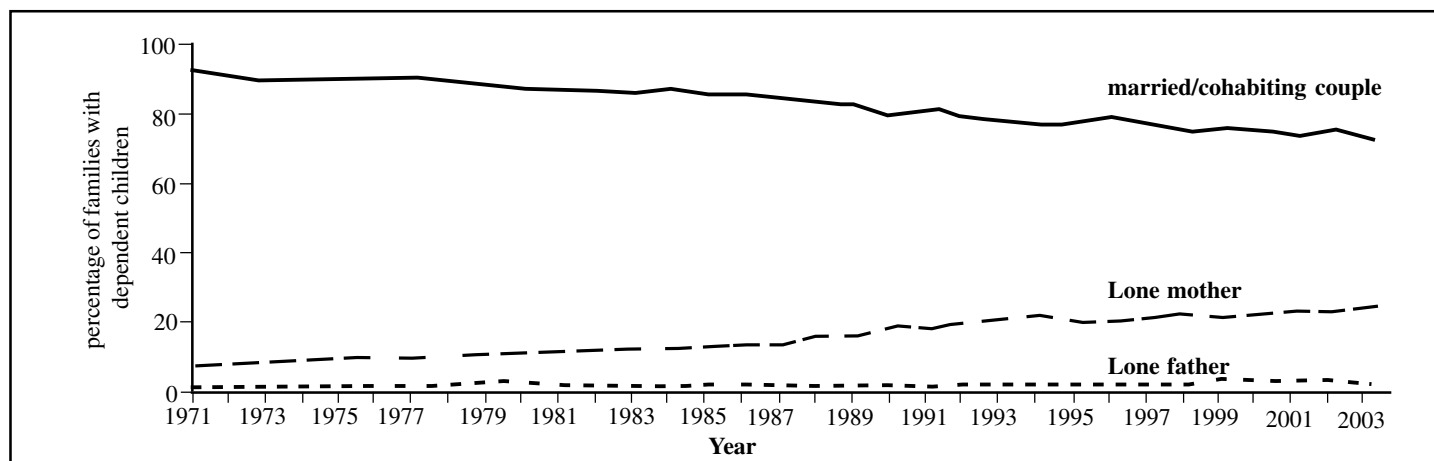
Table 1. Family diversity - % of households Great Britain

	1971	1981	1991	2001
One person				
Under state pension age	6	8	11	15
Over state pension age	12	14	16	14
Two or more unrelated adults	4	5	3	3
One family households				
Couple				
No children	27	26	28	29
1–2 dependant children	26	25	20	19
3 or more dependant children	9	6	5	4
non-dependant children only	8	8	8	6
Lone parent				
Dependant children	3	5	6	6
Non-dependant children	4	4	4	3
Multi-family households	1	1	1	1
All households (=100%) (millions)	18.6	20.2	22.4	24.4

Exam Hint: Use statistical trends as evidence to support your written work.

Divorced and one parent families

One parent or single parent families are not something new. However, in the past most were created through the death of a parent. Today the majority are created through divorce. In the 1960s, divorce overtook death as the main source of lone parent families. There has clearly been a dramatic increase in the proportion of single parent households in Britain in the last two decades. Since the 1970s in Britain lone parent families have increased nearly threefold as a **proportion of all families with dependant children** (8% in 1971 to 22% in 2001).

Fig 1. Families with dependant children

However, many children in one parent households have two parents alive, and may have regular contact with the parent outside the household.

Lone parent households are likely to share a number of characteristics:

- The majority of lone parent households are headed by a woman.
- The average age of children is generally older with fewer under fives.
- They are much more likely to live in poverty.
- Lone mothers are less likely to be employed than married mothers.

Reconstituted families

These are families formed as the result of the remarriage of one or both partners and they constitute a rising proportion of households as divorces increase. One in three marriages now involve a remarriage for one or both partners. A significant number will already have children from previous marriages.

Although the number of marriages per year in the UK declined from 480,000 in 1972 to 306,000 in 2001, the number of remarriages increased. 14% of all marriages in 1961 were remarriages whereas this increased to 41% of all marriages in 2001.

Reconstituted families are not new. **Peter Laslett** (1965) reckoned that around one quarter of all marriages in seventeenth century England were remarriages. However, this was due to the death of a spouse rather than divorce.

Rather than being seen as inferior families, reconstituted families should be seen as a positive experience for most children. ‘Repartnering’, as **Bernardes** calls it, can result in rich experiences for children because they can gain relationships with step-parents, step-brothers and sisters etc. and the extended kin of their ‘new’ parents.

Table 2. Type of Stepfamily Great Britain 2000

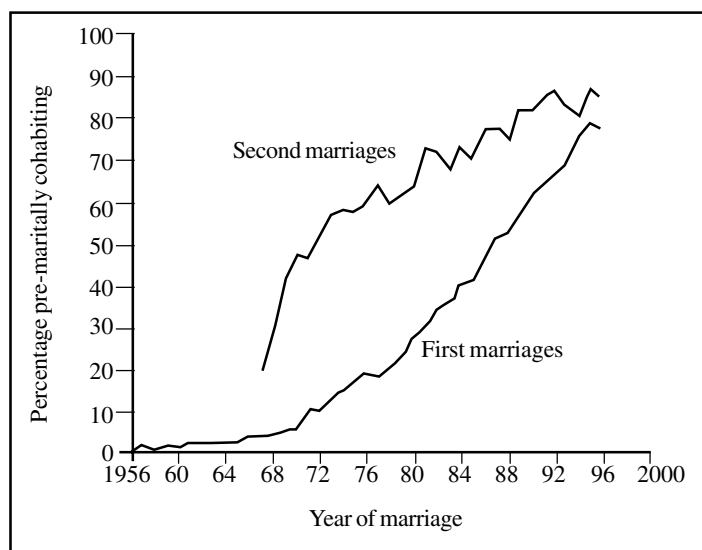
Couple with child(ren) from the woman’s previous marriage/cohabitation	88%
Couple with child(ren) from the man’s previous marriage/cohabitation	9%
Couple with child(ren) from both partners’ previous marriage/cohabitation	3%

Cohabitation

The increase in cohabitation suggests a change from previous patterns, when cohabiting was usually a trial or temporary phase prior to marriage. Today, increased numbers of cohabiting couples raise children in stable relationships. There is evidence that long-term cohabitation is growing in popularity. Since the mid 1970’s, the proportion of women under 50 who were cohabiting more than trebled – from 9% to over 27%. Nearly 40% of non-married women aged 25 to 29 were cohabiting in 1998 (Haskey, 2001)

Exam Hint: You will not be expected to learn figures or percentages. However it is important to know the trends.

Fig 2. Cohabitation and marriage



Living alone

Another option that is increasing is for people to live alone. In England and Wales only 7% of women born between 1946 and 1950 remained unmarried by the age of 30, compared with 28% of those born between 1961 and 1965. There is a similar trend for men.

A growing number of people are living alone. The largest increase is in the 25 to 29 age group in social class 1 – people in professional occupations, particularly women. In England and Wales in 1971, 6% of this group lived alone, in 1991 just under 20%.

A significant number of people living alone are the elderly widowed, usually women, and divorced or separated men and women. However, a rapidly growing proportion are single people of either sex who are opting to live alone. An increasing number of young professionals are opting for independent living.

Anthony Giddens, in an essay in *The Observer* (11 February 1996) suggests that living alone will increase.

Table 3. Percentage of households - Great Britain (%)

	1971	1981	1991	2001
Under state pension age	6	8	11	15
Over state pension age	12	14	16	14

Ethnicity and the family

The patterns of family life among ethnic minorities are influenced by their own cultures and add further to diversity of families in Britain. West Indian families tend to have their own characteristics, based partly on traditional family patterns in the Caribbean. Asian families also show important cultural differences within the family. However, **Sallie Westwood and Parminder Bhachu** point out that it is not possible to stereotype ethnic minority families; ethnic minority households are themselves characterised by diversity.

Homosexual families

In the current social and political structure it is more acceptable for homosexual couples to share their lives openly, although there is still lively debate about their being able to adopt children. Many gay people today openly live in couples or as families. However, the extent to which this is socially tolerated remains in question. **Andrew Yip** (1999) points out that the stigma of being part of a same-sex couple may mean that the partners cannot expect the same degree of social support from family and friends as heterosexual couples.

Postmodern families

More and more people delay forming their own families, choosing to remain single or childless. This has led some sociologists (e.g. **Stacey**) to argue that there is such a thing as the 'postmodern family'. This, she suggests, is because families and gender no longer follow strict patterns of social expectations. People who reject traditional patterns of social life have to renegotiate family arrangements and relationships to suit their own personal needs.

Exam Hint: Try to use the ideas of postmodernism if you can – they are up to date and therefore show the examiner that you can do much more than simply give an answer using ideas that are now 50 to 100 years old in some cases.

Reasons for the change in family structure

Pressures for families to change have come from a number of different sources.

1. Economic

More women are in paid work and this gives women more independence. They can therefore choose whether to marry or to remain single.

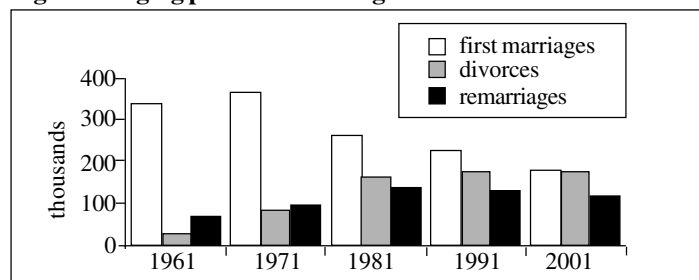
2. Moral

Fewer people seem to subscribe to traditional religious teaching on family and marriage. Therefore, people are able to make sexual and moral choices that previous generations could not have accepted e.g. pregnancy without being married.

3. Legal

Laws governing family and family relationships have changed and so it is far easier to divorce now than ever before (Fig 3). Before 1857 a private Act of Parliament was required to obtain a divorce in Britain. This was an expensive and complicated procedure beyond the means of all but the most wealthy. Throughout the first half of the 20th century a series of Acts simplified divorce proceedings, reduced the costs involved and widened the grounds for divorce. The Divorce Reform Act of 1969 involved a major change in the grounds of divorce. This Act defined the grounds of divorce as 'the irretrievable breakdown of marriage'. It was no longer necessary to prove guilt but simply to show that the marriage was beyond repair. The Matrimonial Family Proceedings Act of 1984 reduced from three years to one the time a couple had to be married before they could petition for divorce.

Fig 3. Changing patterns- marriage & divorce



4. Contraception and abortion

Women in Britain from 1961 onwards were the first to be able to control their fertility with any degree of reliability. This gave women, in particular, a choice of whether to have a family or not and to control when the best time was to start a family giving them much more freedom.

5. Changes in expectations of love and marriage

Since the 1950's, a number of sociologists have argued that changes in people's expectations of love and marriage have resulted in increasingly unstable relationships. **Thornes and Collard** argue that women have higher expectations of marriage today and are less likely to put up with empty-shell marriages. Sharpe's survey of working-class girls in the 1990s shows that they see education and careers as their priority today rather than marriage and families.

6. Social security and benefit changes

The welfare state will support women and their children if a relationship fails. Therefore, single parent families are able to survive on basic levels of income, which are provided by the state.

7. Pragmatic

Many household decisions are made on practical grounds, so that as weddings become increasingly expensive, it is a rational choice to delay marriage until more significant debts such as down payments on houses or student loans are paid off.

8. Changes in the structure of the population

There are proportionally larger numbers of older people and fewer younger people in the population. This means that there are more people living as couples or in single parent households. The Office of Population Censuses and Surveys suggests that there will be an increase of 50% in the number of old people over the next 30 years, reaching a total of 14.8 million (source: www.statistics.gov.uk)

Exam Hint: Show the examiner that you know there are many different reasons for the change in family structure.

Problems of looking at the history of the family**1. Problems with measuring the size of families**

It is difficult to tell exactly how big families were in the past. Divorce was not legal until early this century and not easy to obtain until the changes in the law in 1969. Consequently, many families stayed together in name only. Also children born outside of marriage were given to workhouses or orphanages or brought up by the grandparents as if their own child. Details of these situations are not readily come by, and it is therefore, difficult to identify the size and structure of families in the past.

2. Problems with relationships and roles

Parish records tell us about births, marriages and deaths, but they tell us little about what life was like within the family. Victorian ideology of the happy nuclear family hid the reality of a society that accepted child abuse and prostitution, wife battering and high levels of child mortality, illegitimacy, drug abuse in the home, and a situation in which women and children had very little power over the activities and actions of men. Therefore, it is not possible to gain an accurate picture of relationships and roles within the family.

3. Problems with family structure

It is very difficult to identify the inter-relationship between households. What might look like a nuclear family might actually be a modified extended family instead, but quantitative data would not tell us this.

Exam Hint : Try to show, if possible, that you understand the problems of historical data on the family. This is a good evaluation.

Exam Hint: It is always good practice to start your answers by defining and explaining the words in the title of the question.

Example Exam Questions

1. Identify and briefly explain two reasons for the growth of lone parent families. (8 marks)
2. Describe and account for the diversity present in the British family today. (20 marks)
3. Discuss the impact industrialisation had on the family. (20 marks)

Glossary**Cereal packet image of the family**

Stereotypical view of the family common in advertising. The family is presented as nuclear with a traditional division of labour.

Cohabiting couple family

A family formed by a couple who, whilst living together in a stable relationship, are not married.

Dependent children

Children either under 16 or 16-19 and undertaking full-time education.

Divorce

The legal termination of a marriage.

Divorce rate

The number of divorces per thousand married people.

Empty-shell marriage

The couple share the same residence, remain legally married, but their marriage exists in name only.

Extended family

A family group consisting of three or more generations.

Family

A group of people related by blood or marriage.

Household

A person living alone or a group of people with the same address who share their living arrangements.

Lone parent family

A parent without a partner living with their dependent children.

Monogamy

A norm or rule which permits a husband to have only one wife at a time and a wife to have only one husband.

Nuclear family

A family consisting of an adult male and female with one or more children, own or adopted.

Polygamy

A norm or rule which permits a husband to have more than one wife at a time or a wife to have more than one husband at a time.

Postmodernity

The era after modernity which is characterised by fluidity, uncertainty and a lack of consensus.

Reconstituted family

A reconstituted family is formed when at least one of the two partners in a marriage or permanent relationship has children from a previous relationship (step-family).

Separation

A married couple who end their relationship and live in separate residences but remain legally married.

Exam Hint: Don't confuse changing structure with changing conjugal roles!

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