



Symbolic capital relates to upper-class children in particular developing attributes like self-confidence and a strong sense of entitlement and self-worth. This manifests itself in **personal qualities** such as an authoritative manner (directing the efforts of others in the expectation of being obeyed) and personal charisma (used to manipulate others' behaviour).

Criticisms

- > **Dark side:** Conflict is overstated and consensus underplayed. While the family clearly has a 'dark side', this involves a minority of men (and women). Most family relationships are neither violent nor abusive.
- > **Over-determining:** Marxists over-determine the relationship between capitalism, social class and female oppression within the family. Some radical feminists (see below), for example, argue that patriarchy (male domination of women) predates capitalism, having been a feature of all human societies: the 'problem', therefore, is not so much capitalism as men.
- > **Choice:** Marxism underplays the idea that many women choose to play family roles, such as provider of childcare, because they find them personally fulfilling.
- > **Sexism:** The emphasis on class relationships ignores (or reduces the significance of) other forms of oppression, such as sexism and racism. For Marxists, capitalism is the root cause of oppression and exploitation within both society and the family — abolish capitalism and you end the exploitation of women. If, as radical feminists argue, men are the problem, then abolishing capitalism can't abolish sexism.

OCR examination-style questions

- 1 Outline and evaluate functionalist views of the role of the family in society. (33 marks)
- 2 Outline and evaluate Marxist views of the role of the family in society. (33 marks)

Family diversity

'The family', according to De Vault (1991), is a 'falsely monolithic' concept; rather than seeing it as a simple, homogeneous ('all the same') social group, we need to understand family diversity — from **organisational diversity**, based around family structures, to the concept of **life course**, focused around changing family roles and relationships.

Organisational diversity

Although we've previously outlined a range of well-established family structures, we can further illustrate organisational diversity by outlining three examples of family structures that have seen rapid development over the past 30 years: lone-parent, reconstituted and beanpole structures.

Lone-parent family structures

Lone-parent structures result from two main causes:

- **choice**, involving divorce, adoption, surrogate motherhood or a desire to raise a child independently of its biological father
- **unforeseeable circumstances** such as death of a partner, child abuse, abandonment by a biological parent or accidental pregnancy followed by the breakdown of a cohabiting partnership

These reasons for lone-parent family formation can be understood in the context of **social changes**:

- In the mid-twentieth century, most lone-parent families resulted from the **death** of a partner.
- During the last 30 years, **divorce** became the single most important factor.
- Changing social attitudes (such as a decline in the stigma attached to lone parenthood) have also led to an increasingly common form, headed by the **never-married single parent** (usually the mother).

This is not the complete picture, however; lone parenthood is not necessarily a *fixed* family structure. Many lone parents form new long-term relationships (as reconstituted families). Bedell (2002), for example, reports 'The lone-parent stage in a family's life cycle lasts on average 5 years.' Lone parenthood, therefore, is often a **transitional phase** in family development — a prelude to entering further (married or cohabiting) relationships, or the basis for different, more flexible, **alternative** family relationships (such as co-parenting or 'living apart together').

Furthermore, it should not be assumed that lone parents are always socially isolated and in need of state support. While New Right perspectives argue that single parenthood in particular is not as stable or permanent as marriage, a counter-argument is that we are seeing changes to the way some people form family relationships. A proportion of 'lone parents', for example, are actually living in a family arrangement, such as cohabitation, not statistically recognised; while an unmarried woman may be classed as heading a 'single-parent family', she may actually be part of a long-term family relationship with a man (or indeed a woman).

To understand the significance of lone-parent families, therefore, we have to move beyond the simple idea that all lone-parent families are exactly the same; as with nuclear families, the reality is that of a complex, ever-changing, highly differentiated group. The children of a divorced couple, for example, are not simply, immediately and automatically cut off from the range of relationships, family and otherwise, formed by their (ex-) parents. Their family situation is very different from that of a young, never-married, teenage girl abandoned by her partner.



Reconstituted family structures

Reconstituted family structures are formed, according to Hughes and Church (2010), 'when an adult with a child (or children) lives in a partnership with someone who is not the parent of their child (or children)'. For most of the twentieth century the most common reason for family reconstitution was the death of a partner. Over the past 50 or so years, however, divorce has been the main reason for reconstituted families.

We can note the following figures:

- > 86% of stepfamilies involve a natural mother and a stepfather — a situation that has remained largely unchanged over the past 20 years.
- > 10% of stepfamilies involve a natural father and stepmother.
- > 4% are formed by two adults each bringing one or more children to the new relationship.

Reconstituted families, therefore, potentially contain a wide range of relationships, involving:

- > parents and biological or non-biological children
- > biological siblings
- > step-parents
- > step-siblings
- > half-siblings

As Juby et al. (2001) note, a significant feature of reconstituted families is their **internal diversity**. We can identify three basic types:

- > **Step**: This involves a parent and their biological child plus a childless partner.
- > **Blended**: Both partners bring children into the new family, which creates two subtypes:
 - > the union of two lone-parent families
 - > biological children from either partner plus children from the new union
- > **Co-parenting**: This is a situation, as Smart and Wade (2000) note, where children are 'shared' between two (ex-) partners and their new families.



Suggest two differences between reconstituted family structures.

Advantages

- > **Continuity** of parenting: children are raised by at least one biological parent. In the case of co-parenting, both natural parents play a part.
- > **Ties** to family: This type of family produces 'instant siblings' and a large extended family network (since it potentially combines relatives from three or more related families).
- > **Stability**: Children are raised in a two-parent family which may mean both continuity of parenting and less financial hardship.

Disadvantages

- **Adjustment:** It may be difficult for children to relate to their new step-parent and siblings.
- **Financial:** While a reconstituted family may reduce the financial pressures of lone parenthood, a larger family (plus any payments that have to be made to former partners) can place huge financial pressures on the new family.
- **Tension:** The mix of new siblings can create petty jealousies within the family group.

Beanpole families

- Traditional representations of the family in our society tend to portray it as a pyramid — much thinner at the top (the elderly generation) and much thicker at the base (the younger generations). However, two observations we've previously outlined question this view:
- There is **greater life expectancy**: people are living for much longer into old age.
- **Lower and later fertility** have meant a decline in both the number of children being born and average family size.

This 'ageing population' trend has led Brannen (2003) to argue that the shape of families is also changing in response to demographic changes. Carvel (2003), for example, argues 'Fewer brothers and sisters in one generation leads to fewer aunts and uncles in the next...instead of a "bushy" family tree with lots of lateral branches, there are longer, thinner patterns of family relationships.'

Brannen studied four-generation families (great-grandparents, grandparents, parents and children) that 'constitute a significant proportion of the population' and found a trend towards a beanpole family — a longer, taller, thinner structure with fewer children and more generations of the elderly. The consequences of this change are felt in terms of both intergenerational and intragenerational contacts.

Intergenerational contacts (contacts between generations, or 'up and down' the family tree) are reinforced because:

- Grandparents live longer and enjoy greater physical fitness that allows active participation in family life.
- Parents and grandchildren offer greater levels of support to their elderly relatives, while grandparents become increasingly involved in the care of grandchildren.

Brannen argues increasing intergenerational ties provide a range of benefits for family members:

- transmission of material assets and values
- childcare and elder care
- sociability
- emotional support

Intragenerational contacts (contacts within generations, or 'across' the family tree) are weakened, for two reasons:



- Where relationships are disrupted by divorce, separation and cohabitation breakdown, family members lose contact across the family tree.
- Families having fewer children has meant a decline in intragenerational numbers — fewer aunts and uncles, for example.

Although this suggests the development of a new and different family structure in our society, Brannen notes an additional dimension of diversity in that **intergenerational** contacts between family members can differ markedly *between* beanpole families. Two factors here are the following:

- **Occupational status:** Families differ in their resources (such as levels of income) and this affects 'the capacity of different generations to provide support, especially material support'. Working-class families are less likely to offer financial support to their children. Changes in occupational status between generations (e.g. grandparents who were low-skill manual workers and grandchildren who've experienced upward social mobility and occupy higher-ranking professional positions) can result in families becoming estranged from one another (e.g. changes in values and lifestyles may mean they have little or nothing in common outside their family connection).
- **Geographical proximity/mobility:** The flexibility of beanpole families means the connections between different generations can be more easily 'lost' when, for example, grandparents retire to another part of the country or parents relocate for work reasons. Although these connections can be virtually maintained (through phone calls, email and the like), the practical help family members can offer each other is limited by geographical mobility.

The structure of beanpole families also creates the idea of a **pivot generation** — sometimes called a 'sandwich generation' or, in Westland's (2008) evocative phrase, 'both-end carers'. In four-generation families, women (mainly) in the 50–70 age group ('the grandmother generation') often take on a pivotal role in the provision of informal family services, looking upwards to the care of the elderly and downwards to the childcare of grown-up children.

Evaluation

Grundy and Henretta (2006) argue that a 'sandwich generation' — 'those mid-life adults who simultaneously raise dependent children and care for frail elderly parents' — is very unusual. While a pivot generation exists, its role is not clear-cut: in some instances 'the demands from adult children and from elderly parents compete, with the result that those who provide help to one are less likely to provide help to the other'. Lundholm and Malmberg (2009) also suggest that the role of a pivot generation has been overstated, mainly because 'By the time the parents and parents-in-law of the middle-aged are old and fragile and in need of care, their children have already left the parental home.'

While it's important not to underestimate the significance of beanpole family structures, it's equally important not to overestimate their importance. Although

four-generation families have increased over the past 30 years, around 60% of those over 80 are part of three-generation families. In addition, increased childlessness also means we may be talking about very different types of family structure over the next 30 to 50 years.

? Briefly define the idea of a 'pivot generation'.

Household diversity

Under organisational diversity we can also discuss household diversity.

Single-person households

Single-person households involve an adult living alone. Historically, death of a partner and relationship breakdown (separation in the past and divorce more recently) have been the main reasons for this household structure. However, there's evidence that some in our society are *choosing* to live this way.

Hughes and Church (2010) suggest 'the increase in the proportion of people living alone...is one of the most noticeable changes in household composition over the past few decades', with numbers increasing as follows:

- > 1961: around 1.7 million
- > 1971: around 3 million
- > 2009: more than 7 million

They also note three points concerning this type of household:

- > **Region:** Single-person households are more likely to be found in urban areas, especially large cities. For example, Eversley and Bonnerjea (1982) note the '**geriatric wards**' located in coastal towns such as Eastbourne which attract large numbers of the retired elderly, living far away from relatives. They also note that inner-city areas in London, Manchester and Birmingham attract large numbers of single people (living in cheap private accommodation) likely to be living apart from wider kin (sometimes temporarily in the case of students).
- > **Age:** Of single-person households, 50% involve an adult receiving a state pension. The number of 'single pensioner households' has doubled over the past 50 years (from 7% of all households in 1961 to 14% in 2009) but has stayed roughly the same for the past 30 years. Single households containing people under pensionable age have almost doubled as a proportion of all households over the past 30 years (from 8% in 1981 to 14% in 2009). Since 1961 their proportion has trebled.
- > **Proportion:** One-person households now comprise 30% of all households — double the percentage in 1961 (14%). Over the past 50 years the trend has been upward. Over the last 30 years the rate of increase has slowed (from 22% of all households in 1981), and over the last 20 years growth has all but flattened.



? Identify one trend in single-person households over the past 50 years.



Couple households

Couple households involve two adults living without children. They account for 29% of all households (Hughes and Church 2010).

In terms of diversity, both single and couple households involve differences in:

- > **income** — between the employed and unemployed, for example, and between dual- and single-income couples
- > **age and lifestyle** — with young singles or couples having different lifestyles from older singles or couples

Shared households

Shared households involve unrelated people living together. Hughes and Church (2010) also note that around 1.5 million people live in a range of 'communal establishments', such as prisons, hospitals, care homes and hotels (live-in staff).

Other forms of diversity

While organisational diversity is important, there are other significant forms of family diversity. In the following sections we will look at class, cultural and sexual diversity.

Class diversity

We can look at class differences in family life using a simple distinction between manual (working class) and non-manual (middle class). This rough-and-ready classification has limitations (some skilled manual occupations, for example, have higher income and status than routine non-manual work), but it does let us examine some broad class-based behavioural differences in family life (in addition to those we've noted in earlier sections). Class diversity, in this respect, is manifested in several areas, discussed below.

Family structures

Single (never-married) parents are, according to O'Neill (2002), more likely to be originally drawn from the working class and to have far lower average incomes than their middle-class peers. They are also more likely to live in poverty than two-parent families of the same class.

Beanpole family structures are less common and long-lived in middle-class than in working-class families (where the age of mothers at first birth is much lower, which means four- or sometimes five-generation families are more likely to develop).

Adult relationships

Patriarchal families are male-dominated and likely to be oppressive and exploitative of women; these relationships are still more common in working-class families where family roles may be **segregated** (with the female partner focused on home and children, the male on paid work). Family roles and relationships are unequal, with the male being the head of the household.

Middle-class families are more likely to be **symmetrical** rather than patriarchal. Symmetrical family relationships, as discussed by Willmott and Young (1973), are

characterised by **joint conjugal roles** that demonstrate greater levels of gender equality in terms of both paid and unpaid (domestic) work. Although they suggest that this is an increasingly common family arrangement in contemporary Britain, it is still arguably more characteristic of middle-class families.

Adult-child relationships

Historically middle-class families have been more **child-centred** (family resources, attention and effort are invested in a child's physical and social development). The decline in average family size across all classes (and within the working class in particular) suggests that working-class families are just as interested in investing in their child's development, but lack the resources (economic and cultural) of their middle-class peers. In terms of **cultural capital**, upper- and middle-class families are better positioned to provide the knowledge, skills and personal motivations to see their children through higher education.

Lareau (2003) also points to differences in the way parents interact with their children:

- **Concerted cultivation** is a style characteristic of middle-class parents who 'actively foster their children's talents, opinions, and skills...The focus is on children's individual development.' This results, she argues, in middle-class children gaining 'an emerging sense of entitlement' they take into their adult life.
- **Natural growth** is an approach to parenting more characteristic of working-class parents: 'Parents care for their children, love them, and set limits for them, but within these boundaries, they allow the children to grow spontaneously...children generally negotiate institutional life, including their day-to-day school experiences, on their own.'

While neither type is 'superior', Lareau argues middle-class children enter adulthood better equipped to meet the demands of higher education and the workplace — a *cultural* advantage that translates into *economic* advantage.

Social capital

Kinship networks are important in terms of the help (financial, practical, academic and so on) family members can provide. Working-class families are generally better positioned to offer *practical* forms of help (exchanging services between family members, for example) whereas middle-class families are better positioned to offer both *financial* and *networking* help to their children.



Identify and explain two class differences in parent-child relationships.

Cultural diversity

This is expressed across a range of categories. We will look at attitudes and lifestyles, age, gender and ethnicity.



Attitudes and lifestyles

Cultural changes here contribute to family and household diversity in terms of **religion**. The decline in organised religion (**secularisation**) among *some* ethnic groups partly accounts for:

- > increases in cohabitation
- > a decline in the significance of marriage
- > increases in divorce
- > the availability of remarriage after divorce

For other ethnic groups the reverse may be true — their religion puts great emphasis on marriage and disallows divorce.

Age

Age diversity involves different stages of both individual and family life spans; the family experiences of different **generations** may, for example, be different:

- > Family members raised during the 1940s had the experience of war, rationing and the like; those raised during the 1990s developed very different attitudes and lifestyles forged through a period of economic expansion.
- > The family experience of a young couple with infant children is different from that of an elderly couple without children.
- > Children experience family life differently from adults.

Hughes and Church (2010) note there are around 13 million dependent children in the UK:

- > 76% (around 10 million) live in a dual-parent nuclear family (down from 88% in the 1980s).
- > 22% live with a lone parent (up from 7% in the 1970s). 20% currently live with a lone mother, 2% with a lone father.

Gender

Gender diversity occurs with regard to paid employment, roles and status.

Paid employment

Johnson and Zaidi (2004) note that men are now working fewer and women more years than in the past, and that these changes impact on family life and relationships in several ways:

- > Marriage occurs at a later stage in the life cycle than 30 years ago. Many women delay marriage until they have established a career.
- > Male and female roles have changed. The family group is less patriarchal and the division of domestic labour is 'less unequal' now — though by no means equal (women still do the majority of domestic work).
- > Women are less likely to leave paid employment, never to return, once they marry or start a family. In addition retirement — something historically associated with men — is now increasingly associated with women.

Roles

Matheson and Summerfield (2001) note a significant move away from a 'traditional division of family labour' as more women enter paid work. They also note that 'the proportion of couples with dependent children where only the man is working has decreased'.

The Labour Force Survey (2005) indicates women with dependent children are less likely to be in paid employment than those without dependent children. In addition, mothers with children under 5 years old are less likely than those with older children to combine childcare with paid work.

Status

A variety of status differences exist within and between families, focused, for example, around distinctions between:

- family types (such as single- and dual-parent types)
- individuals (single, married, divorced or cohabiting, for example)
- roles (paid employment, domestic employment and combinations of both)

Ethnicity

Mann (2009) notes Britain's Asian and black Caribbean populations make up around 70% of the minority ethnic population. Berthoud (2004) has identified some key differences within and between these groups.

Black Caribbean families have the following characteristics:

- Low marriage rates: Mann (2009) noted black Caribbean (along with white) families with dependent children 'had the largest proportion of cohabiting couples', while Modood et al. (1997) noted around 40% of black Caribbean adults under 60 were in formal marriages (compared to 60% of whites).
- Division of labour: Dale et al. (2004) found black women are more likely to 'remain in full-time employment throughout family formation' than their white or Asian peers.
- High rates of separation and divorce.
- High rates of single parenthood: Mann (2009) noted 45% of black Caribbean families were headed by a lone parent, compared with 25% of white families. Hughes (2009) also reported around 56% of dependent children lived with a lone parent.
- Smaller family size (an average of 2.3 people).
- Absent fathers (not living within the family home but maintaining family contacts).

South Asian (Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi) families have the following characteristics:

- High marriage rates, with a greater likelihood (especially among Muslims and Sikhs) of arranged marriage. Berthoud (2005) noted around 75% of Pakistani and 65% of Indian women were in marital relationships by their mid-twenties. Cohabitation, according to Mann (2009), 'is less usual amongst Asian and Chinese populations'.



- > Low rates of divorce and single parenthood. Self and Zealey (2007) noted that around 10% of Pakistani/Bangladeshi and 5% of Indian families were headed by a lone parent. Hughes (2009) notes that around 15% of all dependent children live with lone parents, the lowest for all ethnic groups.
- > Larger family size: 'Bangladeshi and Pakistani families tend to be larger than families of any other ethnic group' (Mann 2009).
- > Power and authority within the family are more likely to reside with men (patriarchy), and are reflected in 'traditional' family roles. A majority of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, for example, look after home and family full-time. Dale et al. (2004) suggested Indian women generally opted for part-time paid employment once they had a partner, while both Pakistani and Bangladeshi women were more likely to end paid work once married and producing children.

We can also look at **extended networks** in relation to ethnicity. A number of studies of **white working-class** family life all pointed to 'the significance of extended kinship networks in the daily life of families' (Mann 2009):

- > Anderson's (1995) study of Preston in the 19th century
- > Willmott and Young (1957) in East London
- > Rosser and Harris's (1965) study in Swansea

Two restudies — Dench et al. (2006) in East London and Harris et al. (2008) in Swansea — found that the formerly white areas now included a substantial black minority population for whom extended family networks remained important. The effects of both class and poverty explain why some minority ethnic groups (and sections of the white majority) form extended family networks.

Chahal (2000) argues that minority groups are subject to varying levels of **racist victimisation**, and that extended family networks with traditional family structures and lifestyles can give a sense of group protection in the face of outside aggression.

Custom and tradition are further factors influencing family diversity. Chahal (2000) notes that among Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnicities, older (but not necessarily younger) family members supported cultural traditions involving:

- > multi-generational households
- > traditional divisions of labour
- > arranged marriages

Chahal notes that African-Caribbeans, on the other hand, 'were likely to emphasise individualism, independence and physical and emotional space'.

Two further explanations for cultural diversity — 'individualisation' and 'negotiation' — are explored when we examine postmodern approaches to family diversity.



Identify and explain two types of family cultural diversity.

Sexual diversity

While overt stigmatisation may have declined to the point where gay and lesbian families are generally socially accepted, they are still comparatively rare. They do, however, have a part to play in family diversity.

Family structures

Gay and lesbian families and households include:

- singletons
- lone parents
- cohabiting couples
- civil partners
- those 'living apart together'

Although some past gay and lesbian relationships have involved children (from a partner coming from a heterosexual relationship), Ryan and Berkowitz (2009) suggest gay and lesbian couples now have a range of choices about how to have and raise children:

- **Surrogacy:** This involves paying someone to carry a baby to term using sperm donated by one of the male partners. A major attraction of this route is that it establishes, as Bergman (2010) argues, a clear biological link between father and child (and some couples take it in turns to father children in this way). A cheaper alternative option is a co-parenting arrangement with either single women or lesbian couples
- **Adoption:** While not always as easy a route as for heterosexual couples, this is increasingly a possibility for those who reject other options. It became illegal for adoption agencies to discriminate against gay and lesbian couples in 2007.
- **Instant families:** One or both partners bring children into the (reconstituted) family from previous heterosexual relationships.
- **Sperm donation:** Short et al. (2007) argue a 'lesbian baby boom' (or 'gayby boom') has occurred over the past 30 years. They also note the practice of 'each member of the couple giving birth to one or more children' (similar to the practice of gay men taking it in turns to father children).



A gay couple with their children

TOPPHOTO



Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity refers to the idea that partners in sexual relationships fall into two distinct and complementary categories; in heterosexual relationships these categories are male and female and are associated with different gender roles and responsibilities.



Homosexual couples, of course, are the same sex so we might expect family roles and relationships to be different.

However, Dalton and Bielby (2000) found lesbian couples tended to follow conventional notions of motherhood and 'gendered expectations of what it means to be a mother'. Rabun and Oswald (2009) also found many gay families adopted a version of heteronormativity as part of their 'parenting script'; however, a substantial minority did not, and actively questioned the idea that 'good parenting' required one partner to play a 'father' role and the other a 'mother' role.

A further aspect of heteronormativity illustrated by the gay men in Rabun and Oswald's study is that they generally tried to live as a nuclear family, rather than develop a radical alternative. Seidman (2005) argues this is understandable as a means of both 'gaining cultural acceptance' for gay families and experiencing 'a symbolic feeling of doing family "correctly"'.



Suggest two options available for gay and lesbian couples to start families.

Contemporary views of family diversity

Neale (2000) asks the question 'How are we to view the diversity and fluidity of contemporary patterns of partnering, parenting and kinship?' and offers two general options for the answer: 'Should we view these transformations with optimism...or concern?' In this section we can examine each of these options in turn.

Postmodernism: an optimistic approach to diversity

For postmodernists 'a family' is whatever people want it to be. They reject the idea that we can talk about *'the family'*; rather, what we have is people living out their lives in ways they believe are acceptable and appropriate. Postmodern approaches, therefore, view family groups as **arenas** in which individuals play out their personal narratives, involving two basic forms of individualistic experience:

- > **Choice:** People are increasingly able to make behavioural decisions that suit their particular needs, desires and circumstances — regardless of what others may think.
- > **Pluralism:** This is seen as the defining feature of postmodern societies. Societies are now characterised by a plurality of family forms and groups, and each family unit is **exclusive** — every family involves people working out their personal choices and lifestyles in the best ways they can. As Stacey (2002) puts it when discussing same-sex relationships, 'Every family is an alternative family.'

In this respect Elkind (1992) suggests postmodern society has produced the **permeable family** that 'encompasses many different family forms: traditional or nuclear, two-parent working, single-parent, blended, adopted child, test-tube, surrogate mother, and co-parent families. Each of these is valuable and potentially successful.' Elkind argues that:

- The modern family spoke to our need to *belong* at the expense, particularly for women, of the need to *become*.
- The postmodern (permeable) family celebrates the need to *become* at the expense of the need to *belong*.

The general argument, therefore, is:

- There is no single, inviolate way to 'be a family' (a position, as we will see, hotly disputed by the New Right).
- If families are simply 'individual organisations', tailored to people's specific needs and desires, it makes no sense to talk about their 'functions' (as in functionalism) or their 'oppressive and exploitative structures' (as in Marxism and feminism).

The 'celebration of difference' is a key attribute of postmodern approaches; diversity should be embraced, either because it points the way towards an optimistic realignment of family roles and relationships or because we are powerless to prevent it. Societies are increasingly global sites of conflict, subject to a range of economic, political and cultural pressures and processes that create ideas (choice, uniqueness, pluralism) that impact forcefully on individual family roles and relationships.

As Zeitlin et al. (1998) argue, postmodern society frees people from the restraints of the past and offers them new ways of thinking, acting and being. There are 'multiple realities, and an exhilarating profusion of world views' that characterise a type of society 'that has lost its faith in absolute truth' so that 'people have to choose what to believe'. A range of ideas about family diversity follow from this characterisation, as discussed below.

Economic changes on a global scale, Zeitlin et al. argue, are leading to a breakdown of 'social conformity'. In the past, for example, women generally needed to marry because they were barred from the workplace or consigned to low-paid work which made their survival impossible without male support. Inheritance laws also meant children needed to be produced within marriage. With increasing economic independence and gradual changes in inheritance laws, marriage is no longer an economic necessity for women, who have greater freedom of choice in their relationships. Where choice leads, diversity follows: both structural diversity (different family types) and relational diversity (marriage, cohabitation, living-apart-together, heterosexual, homosexual). These changes are, postmodernists argue, inevitable and irreversible.

In addition, **exposure to new ideas** (through cultural agencies like the media — television, film, the internet and so on) makes people question traditional ways of thinking and behaving; 'the way things have always been done' no longer holds people in its grip as people start to exercise their increased choices in personal relationships and lifestyles. Diversity follows from different people making different choices, as choices that were once denied (from divorce to homosexuality) become available. Traditional types of family relationship (such as marriage and children) sit alongside newer forms (such as childlessness or living apart while maintaining family relationships).



This leads to **cultural changes**. As exposure to different cultural ideas increases, what was once new and exotic behaviour simply becomes *routine*; people gradually become more accepting of 'single-parents, surrogate-mothers and gay and lesbian families'. In this globalised context, Jagger and Wright (1999) argue attempts to 'turn back the tide of family diversity' and 'recapture an idealised "nuclear" version of family life where time stands still and traditional values are re-vitalised' is no longer an option.

Neale (2000) summarises the general postmodern position in terms of a '**relational approach**' to understanding diversity that involves:

- > **Commitment**: Family (and other personal) relationships are increasingly played out in micro-networks; people negotiate their relationships in ways that take greater account of their own personal needs and responsibilities, rather than worrying about what others in the community might think.
- > **Morality**: In situations where a diversity of family roles, relationships and structures exist, morality-based judgements (that one way of living is better than any other) become weaker and harder to justify. Society in general becomes less judgemental about how others choose to form family relationships.



Suggest an example to illustrate the idea that 'society is less judgemental about how people choose to form family relationships'.

Picking up on the ideas we noted in relation to ethnic diversity, postmodernists argue we need to think about family diversity in the context of two processes: individualisation and negotiation.

Individualisation

Over the past 30 or so years we've become increasingly liberated from the constraints of traditional norms and values, and people have greater levels of choice and control over their personal relationships and sense of self (there are more ways to 'be male or female', 'be a good partner' and so forth than at any time in the past).

Individualisation ('what's right for me') means social norms surrounding marriage, divorce, sexual freedom and the like have changed. This, as Mann (2009) suggests, gives people greater freedom and flexibility in their relationship choices: 'People are far more able to choose the intimate relationships that are important to them, and are more likely to end them if they no longer accord with their personal preferences and objectives.'

To understand ethnic diversity, for example, Berthoud (2005) suggests a scale with two extremes:

- > 'Old-fashioned values', such as marriage, sexual fidelity and so forth. Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnicities are closest to this point.
- > 'Modern individualism', where single parenthood, divorce and the like are openly embraced. Black Caribbean ethnicities are closest to this point (with whites being closer to this point than to 'old-fashioned values').

Differences concerning individualisation, Berthoud suggests, explain why some ethnicities experience higher levels of family breakdown than others.

Negotiation

Individualisation, Mann (2009) argues, means all types of relationship are open to negotiation. Just as we no longer unquestioningly accept traditional ideas about masculinity and femininity, the same is true of families. We 'need to work at' ideas about who is and who is not 'family', and ideas about relationships between parents and children.

In other words, family relationships are increasingly open to negotiation because there is no longer a 'right' and a 'wrong' way to conduct them. Negotiation, by its very nature, produces change. An example is the role of grandparents, who were once more likely to be seen as a 'burden' on the family, but are now just as likely to be seen as a family resource. Mann, however, notes that negotiation is a two-way process: 'Most grandparents want to help out, but they do not necessarily want to provide child care on a full time basis... Grandparents can no longer be taken as "door mats".'

Evaluation

Individualisation

Postmodernists overstate the extent to which people are disconnected from family and social networks. Although there is greater freedom of choice in contemporary societies, people don't simply exercise those choices in isolation (what's best for me and my immediate social group?). The vast majority live and behave in broadly conventional ways while recognising and tolerating 'unconventional' behaviours. Postmodernists confuse this toleration of 'life at the margins' with the idea that everyone embraces it unquestioningly.

Choice

Choice is not unlimited, nor unconnected from wider social processes. People of different classes, genders, ethnicities and age groups, for example, only have the same choices in the sense that such choices exist and can be made; the consequences of making them may have significant, if not dangerous, consequences (which means they may never be made). For example, while the decision to end a marriage may be relatively straightforward and painless for some, Banaz Mahmud was murdered in 2006 by her father and uncle after she left her unhappy arranged marriage and began another relationship.

Change

Global economic, political and cultural changes are presented as 'inevitable' and 'beyond our ability to control' — something that seems to actually remove our ability to make choices.



Identify and explain one way postmodern families are 'open to negotiation'.



The New Right: diversity as a cause for concern?

A different take on family diversity comes from a perspective that, while drawing on traditional functionalist approaches, involves more directly political ideas about the significance of families for both the individual and society. In this respect New Right approaches can be characterised in terms of the following distinctive elements:

- > personalities (politicians such as Thatcher and, arguably, Blair in the UK; Reagan, Bush and the contemporary 'Tea Party' movement in the USA)
- > theorists (such as Murray, Phillips and Morgan)
- > practices (issues such as anti-abortion, anti-immigration, anti-Europe and pro-liberal economic policies)

The family here is seen as the cornerstone of any society and the New Right promote values relating to ideas about 'traditional family relationships'; families should consist of two heterosexual adults, preferably married (to each other) and with clearly defined gender roles and relationships — which normally involve men as 'providers' and women as 'carers' or domestic workers. Neale (2000) characterises this approach in terms of community, commitment and morality:

- > **Community:** Stable family relationships, created within married, heterosexual, dual-parent nuclear families, provide emotional and psychological benefits to family members that override any possible dysfunctional aspects. Personal and social responsibilities are also created, which benefits society in general; children, for example, are given clear moral and behavioural guidance within traditional family structures — which makes them less likely to engage in deviant behaviour.
- > **Commitment** to others is encouraged by the sense of moral duty created by stable family relationships. Within the traditional family each adult partner plays a role that involves both personal sacrifice and commitment to others.
- > **Morality:** The idea that all types of family structure are equal ('moral relativism') is wrong because it challenges the idea of moral commitment to others that sits at the heart of social responsibility. The New Right endorse social policies that encourage 'beneficial' family structures and 'discourage' forms, such as single parenthood, seen as damaging to both individuals and communities.

Single parenthood is seen as being sustained by governments and the welfare state. This encourages a **dependency culture**, both economic and moral: the former because without state support this type of 'family choice' could not exist and the latter because it depends on the moral tolerance of those who eventually pick up the bill for women 'exercising their choice' to have a child outside marriage. In this view, single parenthood is both immoral and unproductive — it produces poorly socialised, dysfunctional children who go on to live adult lives dependent on state benefits, crime or both.

Morgan's (2000) contention that marriage, rather than cohabitation, should be encouraged can be used to illustrate the idea that family diversity is a source of social problems. For Morgan, cohabitation is not just, to paraphrase Leach (1994), 'marriage

without a piece of paper'. On the contrary, cohabiting relationships can be described as follows:

- **Lightweight:** They 'are always more likely to fracture than marriages entered into at the same time, regardless of age and income'. Cohabiting couples also tend to be more sexually promiscuous than married couples; as Leach puts it, 'Cohabitants behave more like single people than married people' — another reason for instability.
- **Fragmentary:** Those (with children) who marry are statistically more likely to divorce. Of those who never marry, '50% of the women will be lone unmarried mothers by the time the child is ten'. One reason for this, Morgan argues, is that unlike marriage, cohabitation for women is 'not so much an ideal **lifestyle choice** as the best arrangement they can make at the time'.
- **Abusive:** Both women and children are at greater risk of physical and sexual abuse 'than they would be in married relationships'.

Overall, New Right approaches argue family and relationship diversity is undesirable (and in a sense dysfunctional) because it is confusing to both individuals and society. In the case of individuals, their moral compass becomes disabled, until a situation of 'anything goes' becomes engrained in people's behaviour. In society, a kind of 'moral anarchy' reigns; if no behaviour is undesirable, as postmodernists argue, the New Right response is that some behaviours produce morally undesirable *results* — such as abortion practices that take no account of the 'rights of the unborn'.

In general, therefore, New Right approaches stress the idea of 'family uniformity' in terms of structures and relationships.

In terms of **structures**, the traditional (heterosexual) married nuclear family is seen as being more desirable than other family structures because it provides:

- social, economic and psychological stability
- family continuity
- successful primary socialisation

It is an arena where 'traditional family values' are emphasised and reinforced, thereby creating a sense of individual and social responsibility that forms a barrier against 'rampant, selfish individualism'. Within the traditional family, children and adults learn, as Horwitz (2005) argues, moral values reinforced through their relationship with family members.

Family relationships are viewed as a crucial source of both individual happiness and social stability because of a moral core that includes:

- caring for family members
- taking responsibility for the behaviour of children
- economic cooperation and provision
- developing successful interpersonal relationships



Traditional family structures, in this view, provide a much stronger moral foundation for the performance of these tasks.

Writers such as Murray and Phillips (2001) equate both structure and relationship diversity with **family breakdown**. This is seen as symptomatic of a social **underclass** characterised by an 'excessive individualism'; where family structures and relationships break down, the individual is forced back on their own resources for survival and, in consequence, develops a disregard for the needs and rights of others.



Identify and explain two ways 'stable family relationships' benefit society.

Evaluation

The New Right approach is controversial and has attracted a range of criticisms:

- This approach is based on an **idealised** view of families and family relationships that takes white, middle-class families as the desirable norm, one to which everyone should aspire. It advocates a 'one size fits all' family in a society no longer characterised by moral and normative consensus and conformity.
- It ignores the **darker side** of traditional family life. Making divorce 'harder', for example, may well persuade some to try to make their marriage work — but it also traps others in a spiral of violence and abuse.
- This approach confuses rational analysis (what is supposedly best for individuals and society) with a conservative moral desirability; family diversity is seen as **undesirable** because it challenges this conservative worldview.
- While this general approach advocates freedom and choice, this doesn't extend to family life. If people 'don't live as they should' they have to be made to follow an approved set of choices. It presumes, according to Finch (2003), 'a standard model of family life' for which governments can legislate.

Theories and social policies

Finch (2003) argues family policies are created and enacted within the context of ideological beliefs about the family group, the relationships between its members and its general relationship to wider society. Over the past 30 years Conservative and Labour governments have defined and shaped 'family policies' in ways that attempt to manage behaviour by encouraging some forms and discouraging others; an example of this 'ideological dimension' to family policy was the Conservative government of John Major (1990–97), where a recurring theme was 'traditional family values'.

Barlow and Duncan (2000) argue that for subsequent New Labour governments, family policy was initially underpinned by the desire 'to encourage what are seen as desirable family practices, and to discourage other, less favoured, forms'. This desire was, in turn, based around a combination of two intellectual frameworks (**libertarian** and **communitarian**), the basic beliefs of which have shaped family policy over the past 15 years (Table 8.8).

Sociology of the family

Table 8.8 Basic libertarian and communitarian beliefs

	Libertarian	Communitarian
Focus	National: the relationship between the individual and the state.	Local: the relationship between the individual and their community.
Individuals	Individual: People behave rationally and are driven by self-interest (for both themselves and their families).	Community: People are driven by moral consensus, shared values and a sense of belonging to a wider community.
Politics	Individual choice, independence from 'state interference', self-reliance and provision for self.	Commitment to welfare of others (not just immediate family) and duty (individuals benefit from community involvement).
Diversity	Encouraged: People develop family forms and relationships that are 'right for them'. A non-judgemental approach (no type of family is inherently better than any other).	Discouraged: Some types of family are dysfunctional and damaging. A judgemental approach (some forms of family encouraged, others discouraged).
Control	Family relationships and structures controlled by legal contracts (such as marriage), rights, incentives, sanctions.	Family relationships and structures shaped by 'collective moral prescriptions' (ideas about how people should behave) originating with government.
Welfare	Restricted to enforcing legal or social obligations (using the law to ensure maintenance payments by an absent parent). Families encouraged to 'provide for themselves' through insurance.	A tool through which social changes can be effected. Welfare systems have a practical dimension (providing help and support for families) and a moral dimension (channelling most support to 'desirable' family types).

Source: adapted from Neale (2000)

Neale (2000) argues New Labour family policies were confused by combining the most negative aspects of these two frameworks:

- **libertarian** assumptions that people are inherently individualist
- **communitarian** requirements that they behave in uniform fashion

Family policies over the New Labour period combined, therefore, 'carrot and stick' forms of persuasion with moral prescriptions on how to live the 'good' life'.

Libertarian policies included the following:

- Adoption and Children Act (2002): Unmarried couples were allowed to apply to adopt a child jointly. Single people could also apply for adoption.
- Civil partnerships (2005): These gave homosexual couples the same legal rights as heterosexual couples.
- Educational Maintenance Allowances (EMAs; 2004): These were weekly payments to encourage students from low-income families to stay in education after reaching 16 years of age (subsequently abolished by the coalition government in 2010).





Communitarian policies included the following:

- > Children's Act (1999): Finch (2003) notes this 'redefined parental responsibility to include responsibility towards the child'.
- > Child Support Agency: This continued the Conservative policy of legally pursuing 'absent fathers' for the maintenance of their children.
- > Child poverty: New Labour committed itself to introducing a range of financial policies designed to 'end child poverty within twenty years'.
- > Minister of State for Children (2003): This post was created to 'provide integrated leadership and responsibility for children's services and family'. This led to programmes such as Sure Start, designed to combat early-years disadvantages experienced by the children of low-income families.
- > Child trust fund (2005): Every new child was given between £250 and £500, depending on family income, in an account they could access at 18 years of age. This could be added to (by families) and would be topped up by governments (but was abolished by the coalition government in 2010).



Suggest two differences between libertarian and communitarian social policies.

OCR examination-style questions

- | | |
|---|------------|
| 1 Identify and explain two types of family diversity. | (17 marks) |
| 2 Identify and explain two reasons for the growth in single-person households in the contemporary UK. | (17 marks) |
| 3 Outline and evaluate the view that the family is characterised by diversity in the contemporary UK. | (33 marks) |
| 4 Outline and evaluate postmodern views on the diversity of family life. | (33 marks) |
| 5 Outline and evaluate the view that the nuclear family is the ideal family form. | (33 marks) |

Roles, responsibilities and relationships within the family

Men and women

Rather than seeing gender roles one-dimensionally (as a set of things people must do when playing a particular role), an alternative is to see them in terms of **identities** (both social and personal). How individuals interpret and play the 'husband role' is conditioned by their perception of what this role means in general *social* terms (what husbands are